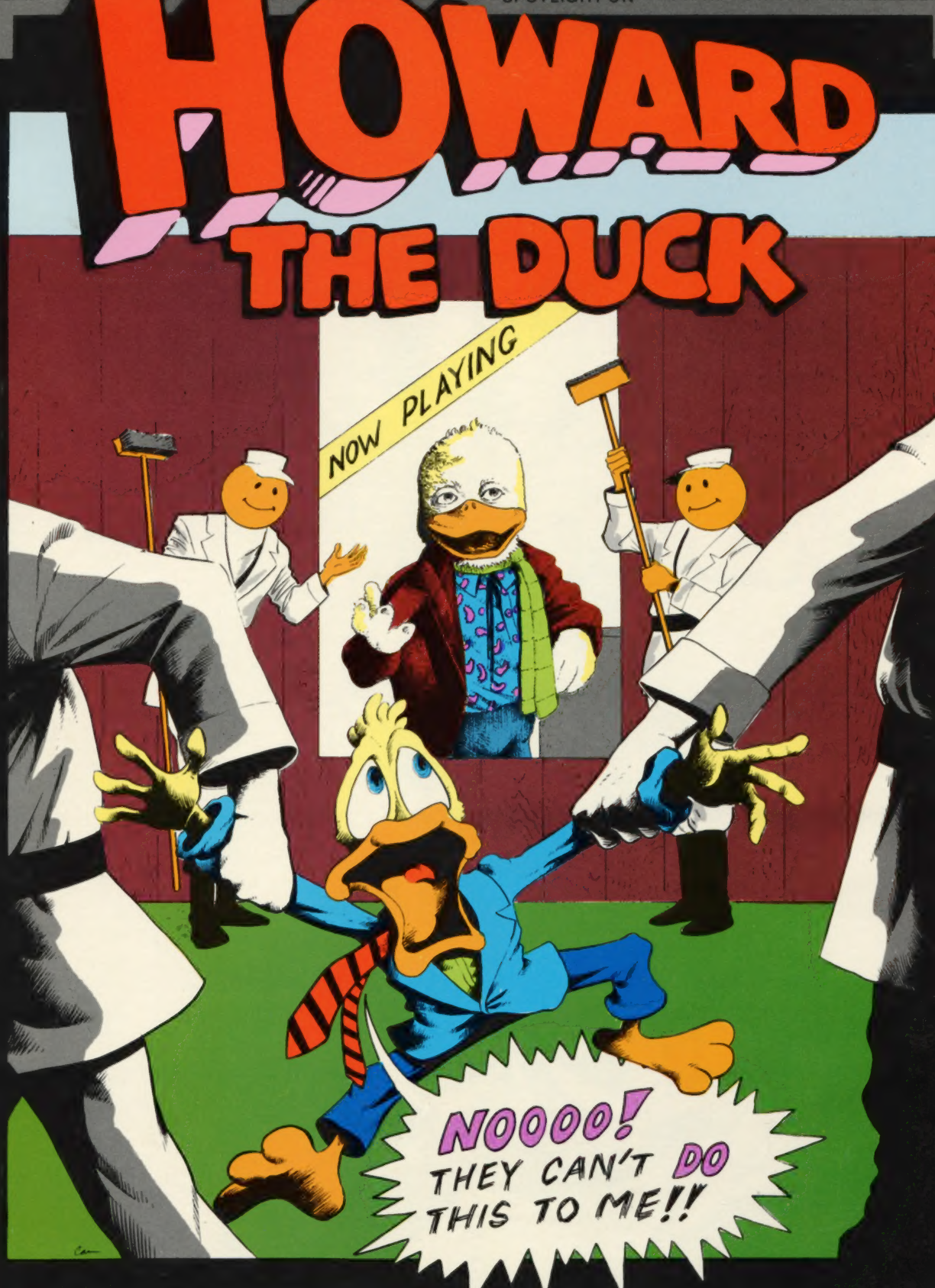
FILES MAGAZINE

SPOTLIGHT ON

HOWARD THE DUCK



BY MARTIN CANNON

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THE HOWARD THE DUCK FILES

EDITED BY HAL SCHUSTER

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INTRODUCTION

One summer day in 1974, Stever Gerber begat a talking duck. For this reason, he commands our attention.

He wrote some 33 stories about this duck, and created a minor sensation. And a marketable commodity. Collectors inflated the prices for back issues of **Howard The Duck**. Buttons and posters and other assorted whatnot hit the market at drake-neck speed. A syndicate wanted to place Howard on the funny pages of newspapers everywhere. Imitators abounded.

Then Gerber and the captains of industry at Marvel comics came to grief. The exact nature of their dispute, and of its resolution (just outside the halls of justice and well within the bounds of acrimony), remain unspeakable matters, for what we are told are sound legal reasons. All we know, and all that counts, is that the mallard and his maker became divorced.

Others began typing up Howard stories. His adventures left the confines of their tawdry little comic book and filled a glossy magazine. The newspaper strip proceeded apace.

And then — failure.

The momentum stopped, the fad ceased, the prices of back issues deflated, newspapers rejected the strip, and fans lost interest. Marvel cancelled the magazine. The imitations stopped.

Some still fondly recalled how much Howard once amused them. Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz were among these die-hards. They had achieved some reknown as the authors of **American Graffiti** and **Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom** and other screenplays. They convinced one George Lucas, multi-millionaire purveyor of children's fantasies, to fund a $30,000,000 plus attempt to capture on screen the drabbletailed charm of Steve Gerber's 35-cent newsprint ramblings.

And then — *more* failure.

The film version of **Howard the Duck** failed in a way that few movies fail; the way **Heaven's Gate** and **Raise the Titanic** failed, a way that inspires a sort of awe. And also inspires rumours. Some aver that Lucas purposely foisted **Howard** upon Universal as revenge for some sort of mishandling allegedly perpetrated upon Lucas' previous **American Graffiti**. Others hold that Lucas has seriously endangered his own company, Lucasfilm, Inc., with his mammoth investment into revisionist zoology. Some have even told wild stories of fists flying in Universal's black tower as executives try to duck blame for The Duck.

None of these stories deserves credance. File them alongside such outrageous yarns as the one about the grandmother who dried her pooch in the microwave, or the fellow who offered surplus Jeeps for fifty bucks. What remains certain are the facts of boxoffice fiasco, of critical drubbings, of unhappy audiences nationwide.

But these are not the only facts about Howard.

There remains the fact of those 33 comic book stories written by the Duck's only begattor. Those who never read these stories may well wonder what was in them to inspire the expensive folly that followed.

Well, they weren't masterpieces. Not in the sense that **Candide** and **Man and Superman** and **Ubi Roi** are masterpieces. Though Gerber's work occupies a lower level than those wonders of wit, I think that his accomplishment with **Howard**, if allowed a fair appraisal, might well flabbergast those who sneer at the comics medium, or who know the Duck only from his subsequent incarnations. For these stories, these unstructured, bewildering, bizarre, renegade stories, written in a white heat for what must have been little more than beer money, nesting uncomfortably in the most despised and rejected of art forms, have one undeniable virtue:

They're funny.

Really, really funny. Both funny/ha-ha and funny/strange, in MEGASPADES.

Which certainly may not be said of Hollywood's **Howard**. Nor, for the most part, can it be said of the versions offered by other comic book writers. They didn't understand what made Howard work. I suspect that, in a way, Howard's creator didn't understand either. I think I do, and I'll lay out the secret right here:

The concept of a talking duck on a more-or-less realistic world was never really that brilliant.

The character's success was a matter of **how**, not **what**.

Stephen R. Gerber's writing, not the duck he wrote about, was the thing that corralled all the fans and interested the speculators and captured the respectful attention of Hollywoodites. He gave **Howard the Duck** humor, irreverence, surreal imagery, a point of view. *Most importantly*, he gave the reader the inescapable feeling that what we were reading was really some sort of peculiarly encoded diary. These qualities made a gooney-bird of an idea fly. These qualitites sped reader interest past occasional lapses in logic, taste or craft.

Some creations can claim an existence independent of their creator, but I doubt that Howard is one such. Those

who followed Gerber gave us none of the wit or personality — alas, all they could give us was a talking duck. Well, it isn't the variety of fruit on display that makes a Cezanne still life worth looking at, and it wasn't the talking duck that made **Howard the Duck** worth reading.

And so, children, we gather now to discuss in detail just what *did* make **Howard** worth reading, and, in the process, to erase the false image created by those who inherited or appropriated the character. There are damn few comics that deserve this sort of attention, really — especially if we restrict ourselves to the product of the major American companies. But the duck demands a closer inspection. Like Monty Python and the original **Saturday Night Live**, this comic book provided the popular culture of the last decade with some of its weirdest and most original entertainments. Let's look at what made it work.

P.S. Please to note, gentle reader, that I resisted the temptation to call this introduction an "Introducktion." I've decided to leave that kind of groaner to such clever folks as Huyck and Katz. For the moult part, anyways.

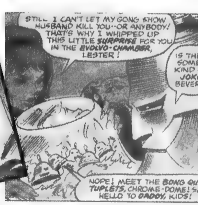
THE AUTHOR

STEVE GERBER

INTERVIEW

This book wouldn't have been worth reading or writing if it couldn't include a long talk with Howard's creator, so I was overjoyed when Steve Gerber expressed his enthusiasm for the project. Unfortunately, both our schedules were as maddening as those pinball machines that force you to play all five balls simultaneously; we postponed the intetview so often it began to resemble a NASA launch. Finally, I coralled him at KPFK, where he had spent the previous two hours providing Harlan Ellison's radio show with a voice of reason. (The subject was comics — Byrne's **Superman** had angered and depressed all present, Miller's controversial **Dark Knight** had fascinated and bemused everyone, and Ellison, though erudite as always, insisted on framing the discussion in exasperatingly silly terms.) We finally decided upon our D-day. Unfortunately, H-hour had to wait until 11:30 p.m., and despite the lateness of the hour, I insisted on having the full story behind each and every issue of Howard, and more besides. Gerber hid his horror well when he learned just how thorough I intended to be, and proved to be both a gracious host and an eloquent annotator of his own work, even though we were practically freebasing caffeine by the time we got to our monstrous interview's end. My apologies to him, and my thanks.

Gerber's comments on individual issues of **HTD** snake their way through my own analyses of those stories. Our conversation, of course, got off track often, and what you are about to read is a collection of derailments. It says much about Howard, the business of writing popular literature, and the man behind The Duck.


STILL, I CAN'T LET MY GONG-KNOW HUSBAND KILL YOU--OR ANYBODY. THAT'S WHY I WHIPPED UP THIS LITTLE SURPRISE FOR YOU IN THE EVOKO-CHAMBER, LESTER!
NOPE! MEET THE BOND OF TUPLETS, CHIRDWE-DOWE! SAY HELLO TO DADDY, KIDS!

I IMAGINE THE BAD P.R. LESTER'LL GET WHEN ITS SHOWN THAT HE'S A NEGLIGENT FATHER...ABANDONING HIS WIFE AND KIDDIES WHILE HE'S OUT CONQUERING THE WORLD!
BSH--HOW??
I SCORED THE QUINTS IN THE EVOLUTION CHAMBER FROM ONE OF LESTER'S MAN-CLIPPINGS!
NO! NO! I DENY RESPONSIBILITY! WHY--WE HAVE YET TO EVEN CONSUMMATE OR MARRIAGE!
WHOSE FAULT IS THAT?
YOU'RE THE ONE WHO INSISTED ON REJECTING POPS' "THE BELLS" EVERY NIGHT 'TIL DAWN!
I VECCHO
YOU DARE SAY THAT IN FRONT OF--THIS...THIS BIDDY!
YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAR, BEVERLY!
!WRAUGHS!
GO AHEAD, LESTER--BONG 'TIL YOUR BRAINS FALL OUT!

INTERVIEW

MC: Well, I guess you're supposed to start these interviews with a broad and easy question, to set your subject at ease. So what's the origin of Howard the Duck??

BG: The story of the Duck's creation is one I've told a lot lately. But I'll tell it again — why not?

It came out of a trance in a brownstone in Brooklyn. The window was always open, because the place was not air-conditioned, and I could hear everything that was going on in everybody's backyards. Someone in one of those backyards had what I think must have been the single most expensive stereo system in the world. The reason I say that is that he could afford only one record. A salsa record that got played over and over and over and over again. And I was writing this story about a collision of realities — a story that already had stuff like Attilla the Hun piloting a dirigible nd a Conan type jumping out of a jar of peanut butter. I needed a visual gag to top all those things. And I swear to God, it didn't come from anything conscious — it must have come from somewhere in the deep recesses of the mind or from the Akashic records or maybe from that damn salsa record — but I found myself typing "A duck walks into the swamp..."

I didn't name him until the next issue. He was named after a friend from high school, Howard Tockman, who used to waddle around and do a duck imitation. And in that second issue he fell off those steps and into eternity because I had been told to kill the character off.

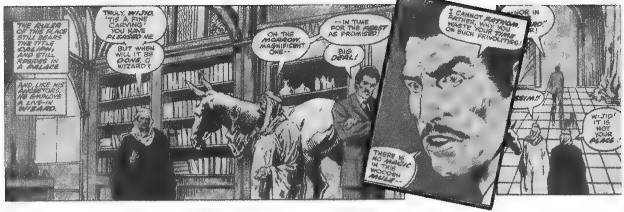
You see, in those days editors didn't look at plots before they were sent to the artist. We had one editor-in-chief, Roy Thomas, but every writer was actually, if not nominally, editor of his own book. So they didn't know that I'd written a duck into the strip until the actual art arrived in the office. I walked in on John Verpoorten, the production manager — John was about six-foot-four and easily 300 pounds, and his job, basically, was to sit behind a desk and glower at everyone who walked into the office — I walked in on this particular day, and John shot me a look like no-one has ever received before. Worse than daggers. A look that said "You've cut your throat, Gerber." I suddenly realised that I was going to have to explain what I'd done to the editor of Marvel comics.

I went to the assistant editor's office, occupied in those days by Don MacGregor and Marv Wolfman, and said "Guys, there's something I'm gonna have to tell Roy, and I don't know how. I put a duck in **Fear** 19." And they looked at me like I was crazy. "What's wrong with a duck?" they asked. And I said "It's not that *kind* of a duck. It wears clothes, it smokes a cigar, it talks..." I showed them the pages, and they both started laughing; we laughted for nearly five minutes, tears rolling out of our eyes, until they told me "You're gonna get fired. This is the end..."

Steeling myself, I took the pages in to Roy. He also started laughing. Then he said "Kill it. It dies in the next issue."

Nobody expected what happened next. We started getting mail. Things like "Murderers! How could you kill the duck?" A couple of guys from Canada, so help me God, sent a duck carcass to Marvel. The response was pouring in. Obviously, we had to do something, though there was still a lot of skepticism about whether or not one could sell a book about a talking duck in the Marvel Age of Comics.

BUT IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO HOWARD OR ME--THIS HEADLINE WILL APPEAR ON TOMORROW'S CLEVELAND PLAIN-DEALER! KNOCK QUITE A HOLE IN YOUR IMAGE, WON'T IT, LESTER?
CLEVELAND PLAIN-DEALER
BONG NEGLIGENT FATHER ABANDONS QUINTUPLETS
AND, AFTER ALL, YOU'RE THE ONE WHO SAID IMAGE IS ALL!
NO! I MEAN--YES! I HAVE BEEN BETRAYED! DELILAH! JEZEBEL! JOAN! BENEDICT ARNOLD! HALDEMAN!
HEY--NAME-CALLING ISN'T GOING TO ACCOMPLISH ANYTHING! CAN'T WE SETTLE THIS LIKE ADULTS...?
I THINK YOU'RE GIVIN' LESTER TOO MUCH CREDIT, TOOTS!
BACONE!
A FLASH OF LIGHT, A CRASH OF THUNDER AND A MIGHTY WHIRLWIND!


TRULY, MY JOB TIE A FINE CANVINCE ME THAT I STILL BEARS THE TITLE "DRAGON" AND STILL RESIDES IN A PALACE
BUT WHEN WILL IT BE DONE, O WIZARD?
AND LIKE MOST MAGICIANS, HE BARELY'S A STEP IN FRONT OF HIMSELF.
ON THE MORROW, MAGNIFICENT ONE--
--IN TIME FOR THE FEAST AS PROMISED!
BIG DEAL!
THERE IS MUSIC IN THE KITCHEN WHILE I--
I CANNOT RETURN HOME IN THIS MANNER! BUT YOU HAVE SUCH POTENTIAL!
HOME IN
BARF!
SEE, IM?
HI, IT'S ME! YOU'RE PLAGE!
OH, I KNOW, I KNOW--BUT IT'S SUCH A PITY, SIRE.
FOUR YEARS OF COLLEGE IN CLEVELAND--
--AND HASBUN HE READY TO "PUNK" ALL OUR TRADITIONS!

But the two short stories we did got an equally favorable response, so we trotted up to Stan Lee's office, said we wanted to do this book, and he said "Fine."

MC: What do you think the chances are that Marvel might allow a Howard the Duck to be created these days? I've heard that the new policy is to have everything checked and approved beforehand...

SG: As nearly as I can tell, that's true. I don't think Howard could be created today. Or you'd get such a compromised version...I don't think it would have been as *individual* a product. It would have been a company product, as opposed to a writer's invention. I don't see many writer's inventions at Marvel these days.

MC: But this was a writer's invention, and people liked it. Someone's making a movie out of it. I don't see the standard Marvel "company product" getting that sort of reaction.

SG: I agree with you. Marvel's great strength in the '70s and the late '60s was its total chaos. Everybody recognised that chaos had its liabilities, but I think that even the people in charge realised that we also had an incredible outpouring of creativity. Marvel was getting the kind of stuff that you just can't get out of a regimented bunch of writers and artists.

Marvel in those days was a lunatic factory. You had some of the weirdest comics ever published. Very strange stuff...not only was it permitted, it was at least tacitly encouraged. Except for things like the talking duck in the horror story, which was so outrageous that even I had an attack of conscience about it. But for the most part, the writers had a great deal of control over the books.

MC: Do you think you could work under other circumstances, without that control?

SG: Well, I have in animation, certainly. But in comics – I'd have difficulty.

MC: Perhaps because animation pays more.

SG: Well, yes, that, but also because the rules are different; the expectations are different going in. Then again the best work I've done in animation was at Sunbow productions, where I had a great deal of control. (Gerber was story editor on **G.I. Joe.**)

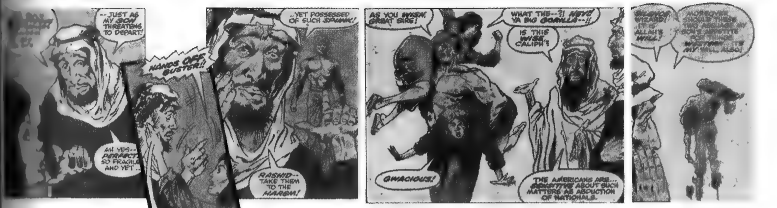
MC: Anyways, back to Howard. One of the things I liked about those stories, especially the earlier ones was the...well, the laziness. Like in that first story with the monster frog, you never bother to explain when he gets that potion...

SG: It made no difference where he got it. Probably sent away for it from some ad in a comic book.

MC: I think that's what gave Howard its surreal edge, and that's one of the things missing from the movie — this idea that you really don't have to spend a lot of effort explaining these story devices, because everybody knows it's just a gimmick, just a gag, just the writer's way of getting from point A to point B...

SG: I think it's more than that. I think that it's evidence of a world view, to be honest. Though I'm not sure if I hold that same world view now. Let me put it this way. At the time – possibly even today — I really wouldn't have been terribly surprised if someone just walked into his kitchen, mixed up some orange juice and alfalfa sprouts and a couple of avocados, and came out with a serum that would turn him into a giant frog. Which would then attack *me*. Seemed perfectly plausible at the time. The '70s were a *strange* period — which may be why it never occured to me to come up

IT SADDENS ME, I HATE TO ALL I...
BY THE PROPHETH
SIRE-- BEHOLD! 'TIS THE VERY CABINET I SWITCHED DEON HASBUN
--ON THE OCCASION OF HIS INAUGURATURE FOR AMERICA!
THE ONE HE HOW DID HE FIX IT--? BOOKED BUY A BROOKS BROTHERS SUIT?!
EXCHANGED AND THEN CAREFULLY MUST BE DIVINE PROVIDENCE
WHAT'S GOING ON?
I DUNNO! I'M ONLY AWKBIRT IN ENGLISH.


...JUST AS MY SCOUT THREATENS TO DESERT!
AH, YES! ARROGANT AT PEACE, AND YET...
HUMAN, ARE YOU BUSTING?!
...YET POSSESSED OF SUCH SPUNK!
RACHID--TAKE THEM TO THE HAREM!
AS YOU WISH, GREAT SIRE!
WHAT THE--?! WHY? YA BIG GORILLA--!!
IS THIS CAMEL CALLIN'?
GHACIOUS!
THE AMERICANS ARE... GUILTY OF SUCH MATTERS AS ABDUCTION OF NATIONALS...
SEVERAL WEEKS LATER...
ALL AT SEA, MY FRIEND!
AUTHORITIES CONCLUDE THAT THE MISSING AMERICANS ARE DEAD AT THE HANDS OF ANY VILLAGER!

with convoluted explanations for these events in my stories. And why nobody complained.

MC: I wanted to ask about issue 5 in particular...

SG: That was the money problems issue...

MC: Yeah. I thought that was terrific.

SG: I liked that, too. That all came from...well, I held a lot of awfully strange jobs when I was making the transition between college and my career. Some of the jobs sort of related to what I do now — I worked briefly for an advertising agency, I worked briefly for a radio station...But I also had some very odd positions. I was a department store Santa Claus. I sorted little pieces of metal in a factory. I sold encyclopedias on the road. Stuff like that.

Anyways, I figured that a duck desperate for money was going to end up doing something like that a lot faster than he was going to end up writing screenplays. So I had him working for a collections agency, briefly, and then he can't stand it...

MC: That's a very well-written scene, actually, where he hits the single mother up for back payments...

SG: It didn't get sentimental at all. I liked that aspect of it. The Duck's attitude never changes; he remains just as cynical throughout, even though there are some things he just can't go through with.

MC: You know, that was one of my problems with the movie script. The Duck slips into an interesting line of work a little too easily. What I liked about Howard was that he was low-class. He was Everyman; he struggled to get by just as much as we did...

SG: He wasn't exactly low-class..,

MC: I don't mean "low-class" in terms of having slovenly habits. He was a proletarian.

SG: Well, we're all proletarians. Since Howard had to make a living from moment to moment, he wound up in what you're calling very proletarian situations — he was a dishwasher, for example. On the other hand, in 5 he also, inadvertently, becomes a TV star very briefly. It's a profession he hates, which I think is interesting. I'm not sure that scene would be understood today — people might wonder "Well, why *wouldn't* he be willing to completely humiliate himself in front of an audience?" That seems to be most people's *dream*, these days. Really. They don't care, as long as their face is on that screen.

But for the most part, because Howard was not a Duck of means, he had to work on that sidewalk level.

MC: I like that. It's one of the reasons the old Honeymooners shows hold up so well — they're so damned depressing. Those people lived in hell.

SG: It was finding humor in the horrible situations that most people find themselves in everyday. That really is true, both of the **Honeymooners** and **Howard** when I wrote it. Most people—and this is something that Hollywood tends to lose sight of—most people simply don't earn hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. Most people are earning $20,000, if that...

MC: ...doing things like separating small pieces of metal...

SG: ...and trying to feed a family of four on what they make. And trying to figure out where they're going to find a new camshaft for their 1968 pick-up.

Then again, the world's changed since then. Ask people now what their aspirations are, and you'll find that most

EXPLAIN--OR I'LL HAVE YOUR HEAD!!
IT-- IT WAS HASSIM'S IDEA, MOST ILLUSTRIOUS MASTER!
HE SUGGESTED WE DISPLAY THE CARVING IN THE FOUNTAIN-SQUARE--
--AND, FOR A WHILE, ALLOW CHILDREN TO SIT ASTRIDE IT WHILE THEIR MOTHERS

want to do some sort of show business. And this is *crazy*. If they don't want to be actors or musicians, they want to be screenwriters. In that respect, the Huycks' script is very accurate. Somebody like Beverly today isn't going to be happy knocking around as an artist's model. She'd probably be knocking around Melrose Avenue as a member of a rock group.

MC: I always liked Beverly. For certain types of men, she's an idealized woman...

SG: *Beverly*? How so?

MC: Ahhh...She's a free spirit. She doesn't seem the sort to tell you it's your turn to wash the dishes...

SG: That's true. On the other hand, she will let the dishes sit there until mold starts to form all over the sink, and *one* of you has to do them. Now *that's* Beverly. I don't know if that's the Beverly in the film, but that's the character I wrote about. That would be her way of making a statement.

The woman she was based on really would say things out of the blue like "Let's go make a million dollars and rule the world." No explanation at all. No need of one. Her particular expression was actually "Let's rule the world in our blue jeans." You don't find too many people like that in the '80s. It's a dying breed.

Now you'll remember that there was a story where Beverly actually marries Dr. Bong, and I had intended her to *stay* married. I was going to write her out of the series.

MC: Why? She seemed to be such a good supporting character.

SG: She was, but I had done with her almost everything I wanted to do, so being the mad, impetuous fool that I am, I wanted her to go off with this other fellow. That would have been the big joke — there would have been this whole rescue scene, which would end with Beverly saying, "— I actually kind of liked him..." And that would be the of Howard and Beverly.

MC: You know, I'm a little sorry that Howard was a Code-appro comic. For one thing, you always seemed to be at your finest when took on religion. You captured the Yuccies' (i.e., the Moonies') mindset so well...

SG: Yes, well, people like that were a major occupation at that time. This was just a few years after Exorcist, and there was a whole boom in occult books magazine television shows. So when the Yuccies stumbled across the talking duck, it was perfectly norm for them to say "Oh my God — the Apocalypse!"

MC: You seem to know more about these oddball belief syst than the average person. In 11, you've got Scientology's lingo down too.

SG: I had read a little about all these "belief system and a lot of my reading was actually research for the ho comics. If you go over there and look at my bookshelv you'll notice a couple of shelves devoted to nothing mythology and religion and magic and various related s jects. I picked up a lot of that just to put into things Tales of the Zombie. And a lot of it I picked up because relig then — even more than today — was a commodity you s on the street. That's still going on, but not quite in same way. It was everywhere you turned in those days.

MC: Even the Kidney Lady, it turns out, has formed a religion of around some weird book she came across in the '40s...

SG: "The Human Kidney: Seat of the Soul." M

ALLIE AND LARGO?
I'M... I'M AFRAID THERE'S A BIG WHITEWALK-OUT
UMM-- IT'S OKAY. HE'S THE CHANNELED ADD WITH THE TELETHON...
I LET 'IM BET 'IM FOR, I'LL TAKE BERGMAN SIXTY
IF YOU SAY SO, BOSS.
ALL CLEAR? FIVE CENTIMOS IT AT SE TO ONE? LET 'EE RIP?
C'MON, LITTLE BALL-MAKE 'ME A BIG BUCK- EIGHTY-WHANG!
THE SILVER BALL'S OBLIGE
OKAY-- LET THE WHOLE $1.80 RIDE ON IT.

Stevens used to collect books like that. I mean really strange things—nothing with that actual title, but they all had titles that sounded like that, that particlar rhythm to the words. And there's still a whole market for books like that out there. They used to be in the self-help sections of B. Dalton's; I don't know where they are now.

That was another major pre-occupation of the time — self-help books, pop psychology. Unfortunately, a lot of it's become institutionalised. In a way, it's worse now than it ever was.

MC: Frank Miller took a few digs at pop psychology in his Dark Knight series...

SG: Oh yeah. Frank and I both felt similar influences on that subject — a book called **The Culture of Narcissism.** It's something that both Frank and I are tremendously concerned with. The whole society has gone, basically, cuckoo. But it's gone cuckoo in a very strange way that doesn't *look* cuckoo, and that's the interesting thing about it. You hear people talking in psychological jargon. They have no understanding of it whatsoever; they simply picked the words up from television or some other source. I mean, that terminology has become a part of *situation comedies*, which was unimaginable just ten years ago. And people *think* that way. They think as though they're therapists, or as if they're patients in therapy. They think as though the whole culture needs therapy, and they talk in the language of therapy. I don't like this tendency at all. I find it almost repellent.

MC: Miller has a scene where Ted Koppel interviews a pop therapist, and that's really the way it is. They're accepted as experts, even though there's no scientific basis to what they're saying.

SG: The **Phil Donahue Show** is practically a daily exercise in this nonsense. I watched that show for awhile because I was simply fascinated with the language — not just Donahue's language, and the language of his guests, but also the way the audience would automatically start parroting this language in their questions. It's fascinating. And it's frightening.

MC: They force you to use their lingo so that you also have to share the preconceptions on which they base...

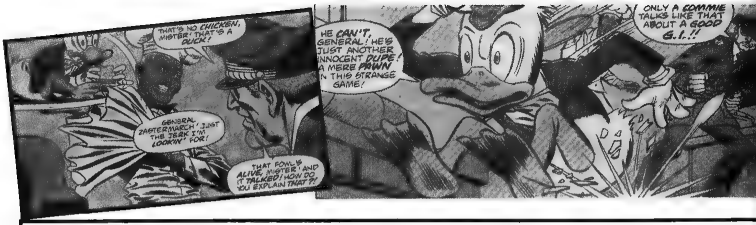
SG: No, nobody's forced. It's just a language people pick up because it's everywhere, the way they'd pick up any other kind of expression.

In fact, that's one of the concepts promulgated by the culture of therapy that I find so hard to accept — that society can *force* you to do this or that. That you can be easily brainwashed, or desensitized, by television. That you can be made more violent by television. That all your values can be shaped by television— or comic books or movies or whatever it happens to be at the moment. As if you had absolutely no will, no influence over what happens to you. And this is simply *not true*. Never was. Maybe it could have been true back in the days before the breakdown of the bicameral mind, but it is not true now. But it's a wonderful way of not taking any responsibility.

MC: Yeah..."All anti-social behavior can be directly traced to irresponsible media input."

SG: People will blame television for *anything*. I've never seen anything like it. That's the first question people ask in the face of every outrage or tragedy: "How did the media

SO, YOU HAVE BEEN SAVING UP THREE MILLION DOLLARS
CAN I HELP YOU? TRY ONE OF OUR NEW HUMBURGERS!
COURSE, I'M A FAIR-MINDED FOWL. I FIGURE YOU DESERVE A CHANCE TO WIN BACK A COUPLA BUCKS
LET IT RIDE!!
OOPS
OF COURSE I'VE! DUMMY! I JUST LOST MY SORTA HOLE!


THAT'S NO CHICKEN, MISTER! THAT'S A DUCK!
SHUSH, SMARTYPANTS! JUST THE JOB! LOOKIN' FOR!
THAT FOWL IS ALIVE, MISTER! AND IT TALKED! HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT?!
HE CAN'T, GENERAL! HE'S JUST ANOTHER INNOCENT DUPE, A MERE PAWN IN THIS STRANGE GAME!
ONLY A COMMIE TALKS LIKE THAT ABOUT A GOOD G.I.!!

create this?" It's crazy!

MC: And that attitude does a lot to destroy narrative art. That attitude says "The media must act responsibly" — and as a result, we can no longer have a protagonist who doesn't behave...

SG: ...who isn't a *role model*. Right. Absolutely.

MC: Howard was never a role model.

SG: Oh God, no!

MC: I liked that he could, in one issue, scream at Wanda "Get me some coffee now, or I'll kill you!" Yet I can easily imagine some "expert" on television turning to that very page and saying "See what they're teaching our kids?"

SG: Yeah, they'd claim it was spouse abuse of some kind or another. That's the way it would be interpreted. Or that it was sexist — why should she get the coffee just because she's the female and he's the male? — and so forth. And this is all forgetting the fact that we're dealing with a *duck*,and with a woman who talks like Tweety-pie. This isn't taking into consideration the fact that the situation could have its comic elements.

MC: So how do you deal with this attitude? The protagonist in all narrative these days has to be either Everyman or Superman. He's not allowed to be his own person.

SG: I don't like that. I have no trouble dealing with it because I just won't write that way. I think that's one of the reasons people had problems with **Veld Indigo**. The main character in that was scarcely a role model either. You had this totally obsessive personality, who may or may not be sane. Who knew if he was really getting instructions from the void or if he was just hallucinating? It was difficult to tell. I find that sort of thing fascinating, I really do. But most people these days don't. I've finally come to grips with that fact. You just can't sell them a character who doesn't fit their stereotypes.

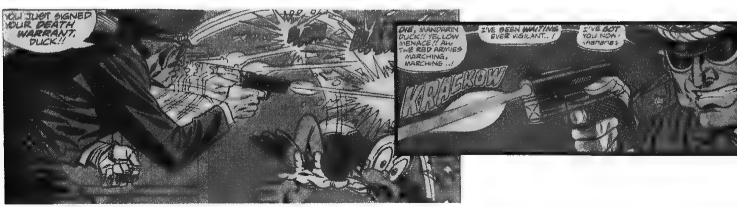
I finally had to coin a term for people like the psychologist in Miller's story, or for network censors, or fo any number of other people who want to channel all sorts o artistic endeavors into their narrow notions of accep tability. I call these people "liberal fascists." You don' need to be right-wing to be fascist; you just need to believe in one basic idea — that society runs better when people's thoughts are controlled. Also, you've got to believe tha you're the one who ought to do the controlling! Bu whether the surrounding rhetoric is liberal or Republican o LaRouche-ian or Martian doesn't make any difference.

MC: Back to comics. They were such a renegade medium in those days — really whacked-out ideas seemed to go directly from the unconscious to the printed page. I take it you didn't think these things out as much...

SG: No, because we were all working at such breakneck speeds. I did know writers who were able to plot thei books ten issues in advance, but I was never able to do that. It was all done on the fly.

MC: I kind of liked that looseness...

SG: It had its positive and its negative aspects Sometimes, you'd forget whole plotlines. There's a part o me that's conscientious; I like to be able to perfect my stuff. But at that time I was rarely able to make a second pass through the typewriter. There was barely enough time to write it, let alone rewrite it. But there was also a lot o energy in that stuff...


YOU JUST SIGNED YOUR DEATH WARRANT, DUCK!!
OH, MANDARIN DUCK!! YELLOW MENACE!? AH! THE RED HORDES MARCHING, MARCHING...
I'VE BEEN WAITING EVER VIGILANT...!
I'VE GOT YOU NOW! HAHAHA!
KRAKEKOW

MC: Yeah, it's the difference between early Roger Crumb and what he's doing nowadays...

SG: I agree. In some ways, the way we did things was the ideal way to do comics. It's the kind of medium that benefits a lot from that kind of energy. One of my big problems with DC has always been that they want to talk a project to death before you get started. You have to take the chance that something won't work. And you have to realise that it's no tragedy if it doesn't.

Fortunately, in the comic book medium—despite what many fans may think — you're not dealing with millions of dollars with each issue. It's a fairly cheap medium to work in.

MC: Which is its big advantage over movies these days. I ignored comics for years, but I picked up a few things recently — Miller's work and Moore's work, mostly — and found that I enjoyed those a lot more than the last few films I've seen.

SG: I've been hearing that from more people than you'd believe. I've been talking to a lot of reporters and movie reviewers concerning the Howard movie, and a lot of them really wanted to talk about comics instead. They're finding it a more interesting medium.

MC: That gets back to the fact that there's not so much money involved in comics. You can take risks.

SG: Look at the Howard movie. That thing has a budget of some $33 million. People get conservative when there's that sort of money at stake. Actually, they should get *less* conservative — after you've thrown $33 million in the pot, what the hell else can you lose, really? Why not just toss caution to the winds, and do what feels right? But that's not the way the bankers and demographers and executives think.

A comic, on the other hand, costs only 20 grand to put out. The difference in risk is enormous.

MC: You and Marvel had your quarrels, and they tried to continue Howard without you. What I don't understand is why weren't they bright enough to realise that this is one character who just wouldn't work without his creator? It's like asking someone other than Arthur Conan Doyle to write Sherlock Holmes...

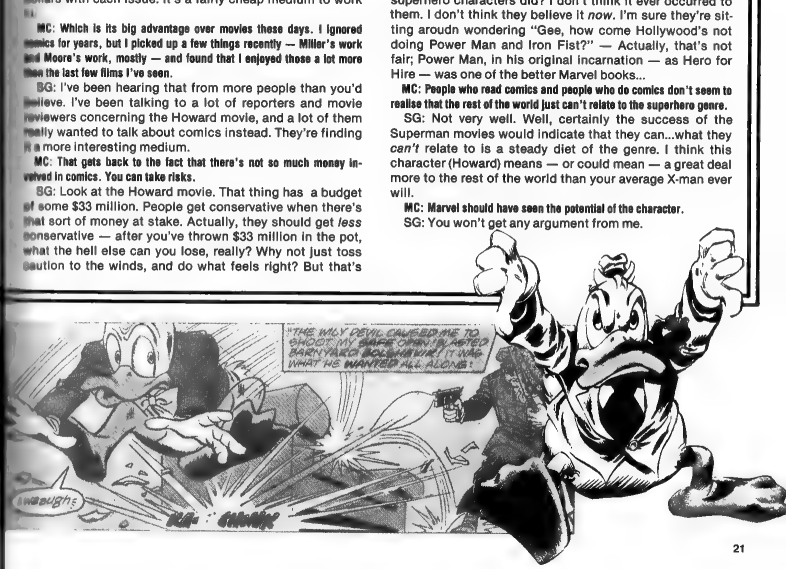
SG: Why weren't they bright enough to realise that this would become a $33 million movie before any of their superhero characters did? I don't think it ever occurred to them. I don't think they believe it *now*. I'm sure they're sitting aroudn wondering "Gee, how come Hollywood's not doing Power Man and Iron Fist?" — Actually, that's not fair; Power Man, in his original incarnation — as Hero for Hire — was one of the better Marvel books...

MC: People who read comics and people who do comics don't seem to realise that the rest of the world just can't relate to the superhero genre.

SG: Not very well. Well, certainly the success of the Superman movies would indicate that they can...what they *can't* relate to is a steady diet of the genre. I think this character (Howard) means — or could mean — a great deal more to the rest of the world than your average X-man ever will.

MC: Marvel should have seen the potential of the character.

SG: You won't get any argument from me.



DOWN, AMERICA! ★ '76
OWARD THE DUCK IN
HOW
HOWARD
GET
OWN,

THE STORIES

FINAL
DAILY
THE PICTURE NEWSPAPER
Vol 51 No 49
HOWARD FOR PREZ
Assassination Attempt
Defended By Gunman
Carter
Yells Fowl

THE COMIC STRIP

In 1977, three Marvel characters made it to the funny pages: Spider-Man, Conan and Howard. Spider-Man's still there — some feel that his comic strip adventures are closer to the feel of the "classic" Spidey issues (anything before, say 40) than what's currently being done in his three-count-'em-three monthly magazines. Conan died quickly. That character's worn out his welcome somethin' aweful, huh? I can remember when the Barry Smith issues were the talk of comics fans everywhere...

And then there's Howard.

I was going to describe his newspaper escapades in some detail. But, as I sat in my cozy little nook in the UCLA microfilm room, spinning through innumerable rolls of celluloid in my search for the Duck, it occured to me: Who else is going to do this? Who, among the 10,000 or so wayward souls so starved for diversion as to subject themselves to my rantings, will be interested enough in the subject to spend hours dealing, as I have dealt, with those cumbersome microfilm machines that remain, alas, our only means of visiting poor Howard and Bev in their newspaper incarnations? Especially since Howard and Bev reside in only the largest libraries—he never appeared in many newspapers, and never had a home in the Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, The Washington Post or any of the other papers libraries are most likely to keep on file.

But if **your** library keeps the Cleveland Plain Dealer, 1977-78, in stock, and if you're so inclined, go, grab some reels, thread 'em up, enjoy. Pay no attention to those people snickering behind your back. They just don't appreciate fan loyalty.

Though even the most fanatic loyalists are advised against looking up episodes issued after Gerber's departure. Had his creator stayed at the helm, Howard just **might** have eventually gained a substantial following among the millions who would never pick up a Marvel comic. But things like Marv Wolfman's "Close Encounters" parody drove the character into the ground pretty quickly. (No offense to Wolfman, who has done excellent things with other characters.)

According to Gerber, the really interesting thing about this strip was the art — or, rather, how the artists were paid. In comic **books**, artists get rewarded for their labors quite rapidly. In comic **strips**, they don't see a dime for some months. Hence, the artists on the strip tended to change fairly often; pencillers used to one system of renumeration had a hard time adjusting to another. Gerber tried to get Marvel to cough up some front money for the artists, and Marvel — ah, but once again we skirt dangerous territory, for this led, in a roundabout way, to one issue in the Gerber-Marvel dispute.

GIANT SIZED MAN THING 3 & 4

"Frog Death!"
"Hellcow!"

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Frank Brunner
Inker.....Brunner, Tom Palmer
Letterer.....Tom Orzechowski, Annette Kawecki

HOWARD THE DUCK 1

"Howard the Barbarian"

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Frank Brunner
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....John Costanza

STORIES

These two all-too-brief stories bring Howard down to earth, where he promptly encounters homelessness, joblessness, fear, misunderstanding, and a great many hairless apes. Not to mention two barnyard familiars (neither duck nor human) gone horribly awry.

In the first tale, a fellow named Garko has discovered, God knows where, a formula which, once ingested, can transform a human being into a brobdinagian, murderous man-frog. For reasons of his own, Garko finds this prospect attractive, swallows the concoction, and begins his destruction of Cleveland. A commendable goal, arguably. Alas, in mid-rampage, Garko shrinks to the size of a normal frog and is run over by a truck. Howard is surprisingly tangential to these proceedings.

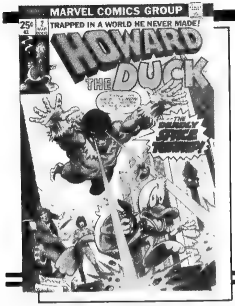
The second story brings Howard face to face with a vampire cow. Seems a frustrated **nosferatu**, unable to find any human victims, went to the animal kingdom for nourishment one night; Old Bessie rose from the dead three days later, and has terrorised farmyards ever since. Howard decides that nailing this killer might get him a job with the local constabulary; he seeks out Bessie, and, after a brief, desperate struggle, drives a stake through her bovine heart. ("I'm sorry, cow," says Howard.) The police happen upon this bizarre scene. They are not disposed to give Howard a job.

These aren't stories, really — they're too short. Let's call them anecdotes. Mind you, they're still quite funny, and they boast some excellent Frank Brunner artwork.

Howard's had it with his new homeworld; he decides that suicide's the answer. He climbs up a giant tower — made, strangely enough, entirely of credit cards. He's diverted from taking the big leap by one Beverly Switzler, who's being held captive in the uppermost garret; she's scantily-clad, chained, and about to be devoured by monsters. Howard rescues her, and learns that she has been kidnapped by Pro-rata, a sorceror/CPA who has mad schemes to juggle the books of the universe. This dastard sends Howard and Beverly on a quest through a surreal, mystical dimension in search of a magic key; Howard survives, and, with the aid of Spider-Man (Huh? What's **he** doing here?), sends Pro-rata to his doom.

I deem to be the only person in this or any other dimension to notice that Howard's first foray in a full-sized comic was an utter failure. The Robert E. Howard surroundings don't really mesh with the Duck's persona, and Spider-Man seems even more out-of-place. Frankly, I always felt that Howard got along just fine without the rest of the Marvel Universe, though I doubt that Gerber, or most fans, will agree with me. But the most damning thing one can say about this issue is that it's simply not very amusing. Certainly not when you compare it to the issues after 4, which was about the time Gerber, Howard, and the audience all began to feel particularly comfortable with one another and the book turned away from parody.

Yet the number "One" has, for most collectors, such magic that this remains the single issue of HTD to command a reasonably hefty sum at the comics shops — though prices are not nearly so high as they once were. According to an amusing article published in, believe it or not, **The New Yorker** ("Undervalued Duck," Feb. 7, 1977), HTD 1 once went for as much as $20. Going rate now is well under $10. If this were even a moderately sensible universe, gems like **HTD** 11 or 21 would set collectors agog, and they'd stop paying such unwarranted attention to anything bearing the number 1 (or the letter X).



HOWARD THE DUCK 2

"Cry Turnip!"

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Frank Brunner
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....Tom Orzechowski

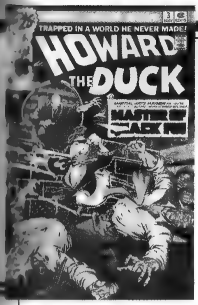
Howard and Beverly have started shacking up. Alas, there's still the matter of Arthur Winslow, Bev's old boyfriend, an even odder duck than the Duck himself. Winslow, a night watchman (and occasional scribbler of overwritten science fiction stories) takes himself just too damn seriously; he wants life to be as heroic as one of his stories. His personality problems are only exacerbated when a giant, intelligent turnip from outer space attaches itself to his head and takes over his body...

The Turnip Man is an immensly powerful being, but the only real accomplishment of his short career is a brief roll in the hay — or, rather, in the park — with Beverly. This prompts her to deliver one of the most memorable lines in the book's entire run: "You sure can maintain a high level of arousal these days, Arthur — dresssing up like a turnip seems to have changed you somehow!" Howard knocks the extraterrestrial veggie off Winslow's noggin; he returns to normal.

Fans tend to remember this issue fondly, and Gerber describes it as his personal favorite of all his Howard stories. Which makes me wish I could like it more. But Winslow seems a rather ill-focused character — though he was obviously derived from a real-life figure: fellow Marvel scripter Don McGregor, who took Gerber's gentle jabs (and a couple that were not so gentle) with characteristic gentlemanliness. Fact is, it's never clear if the Turnip Man's a villian or would-be hero. He doesn't really do anything in this issue except sleep with his girlfriend, which makes this, despite the sf trappings, a real dog-bites-man story. We never even learn Winslow's feelings about losing his girlfriend to a duck. You'd think he'd have an opinion on the subject...! To top it all off, Frank Brunner, usually such an outstanding artist, does unmemorable work in this, his last issue.

HTD 18 does a much better job spinning virtually the same yarn — Amy replaces Beverly, Elton replaces Arthur, Howard the Human replaces Howard the Duck, and Mad Dog replaces the Kidney Lady. Oh, yes, we should note that the Kidney Lady, Howard's most memorable irritant, based on a real-life Times Square transient, makes her debut here. She's the best thing in the story.

Incidentally, this issue's gimmick — an alien creature inhabiting a human body — seems to have inspired the Dark Overlord of the Universe business in the Howard movie. At least Gerber had the sense to recognise the essential silliness of the idea.



HOWARD THE DUCK 3

"Four Feathers of Death!"

Writer	Steve Gerber
Illustrator	John Buscema
Inker	Steve Lelaloha
Editor	Marv Wolfman
Letterer	Annette Kawecki
Colorist	Michelle Wolfman

STORIES

Howard's outraged by the new "kung-fu" craze, and its glorification of violence. As if to prove his point, his meal in a diner is interrupted by one Count Macho, a martial "artist" who has decided to beat nigh unto death an insufficiently respectful street kid; a diner-wide fracas ensues, during which Macho's victim is stabbed. Beverly calls for an ambulance, then administers first aid to the youngster while Howard keeps the crowd at bay.

Afterwards, a highly disturbed Howard wanders off alone to the Lavender Flamingo Adult Book Store where he finds a magazine called **Deadly Feet of Kung Fu**, which specializes in such articles as "What To Do When A Samurai Attacks *You*." Howard's interest is piqued by an advertistement for a Kung Fu instructor, whose shop just happens to be a few doors down. Howard visits this great teacher, one Master C-haaj.

Beverly, at the hospital, learns that the youngster has died. Depressed, she walks away from the hospital — and is kidnapped by Macho's cohorts.

Meanwhile, Howard learns from the *sensei* that Macho is a former student who misuses the master's teachings. C'haaj decides to make Howard into a counter-force. In three hours and seventeen minutes, he learns all there is to know about the martial arts. C'haaj gives the duck a new *gi* — and then both teacher and studio disappear, leaving Howard back in the bookstore.

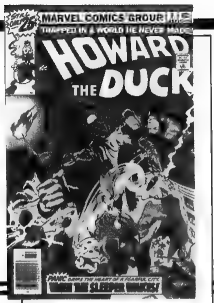
At Beverly's apartment, he discovers a note: If Howard wants to see Beverly again, he must return a talisman he accidentally yanked away from Macho during the melee in the diner. The Duck meets Macho atop an uncompleted building. The two *kung fu* masters clash; Macho falls off the building; Howard rescues Beverly.

*****

This story has dated pretty badly. The *kung fu* craze has pretty much disappeared, as has the "Shang Chi" series, to which this issue makes specific reference. In **HTD 16**, Gerber more-or-less admits that having the Duck learn "Quak Fu" was a mistake — the equivalent of giving him a "super power," making it all the easier for Howard to solve problems with his fists. Fortunately, no future issues make use of this gambit — otherwise Howard's grumblings at the beginning of this story would have proven extremely hypocritical.

Still, there are things here to admire. Not many "humour" writers would dare include a scene in which an innocent is stabbed and slowly dies. Comics (and films) are filled with violence — "clean" violence, fantasy violence, cathartic violence — but Gerber tries to deal with violence as it really occurs, as something messy and nauseating and profoundly depressing. This is, of course, the only possible *moral* approach to the subject. Yet Gerber's attitude towards violence has been roundly scored by a number of misguided critics — perhaps because he manages to break down a jaded audience's numbed reaction to the media charnelhouse.

The excellent Frank Brunner gave up the Duck with the previous issue; John Buscema handles the art here. Buscema's conservative approach to visual storytelling, coupled with a tendency to stay with a character for scores of issues, make him seem a duller artist than he really is. Fill-in issues such as this (and his recent team-up with Miller on **Daredevil**), give us a pleasant reminder of his solid craftsmanship.



HOWARD THE DUCK 4

"The Sleep of the Just"

Writer	Steve Gerber
Penciller	Gene Colan
Inker	Steve Leialoha
Letterer	Annette Kawecki
Colorist	Michele W.

The apartment above Beverly's belongs to Paul Same, an artist and chronic somnambulist, who, while asleep, awakens Howard and Beverly by pounding repeatedly on the floor. They, in turn, rush upstairs to awaken Paul, who pours out his life story: a chronic in-class snoozer at school, Paul has taken to dozing off as a response to outside pressures, and finds refuge and release in horrible, violent dreams, Howard has little sympathy for the artist.

Now unable to sleep himself, the Duck roams the streets, gets involved in a bat fracas — and meets a bizarre figure named Winky-man who, it turns out, is Paul's bedtime alter ego. During the next few weeks, Paul vents his hostility in similar somnambulistic forays.

This outlet does wonders for Paul's work — the normally blocked artist does several fine nudes of Beverly. Alas, these paintings don't impress critic Xavier Couture, who sees Paul's work at a gallery. Stunned by Couture's condemnations, Paul falls asleep, becomes Winky-man, and practically kills Couture, Howard stops his neighbor from committing homicide — but can't prevent Paul's humiliating Couture by removing the critic's toupee.

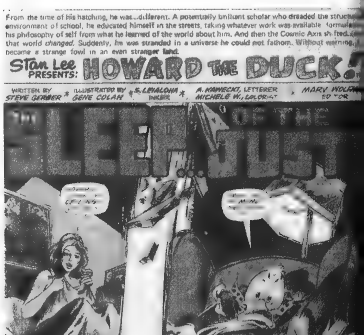
*****

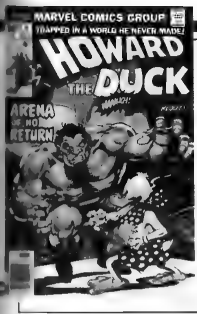
At last, an issue that tries to draw humour from personality, as opposed to parody. No specific references to other comics here, though there are plenty of references to what we are tempted to assume is Gerber's own life.

Is the writer indulging in some minor narcissism? Arguably. Yet one of the things that makes HTD attractive is our suspicion that much of the book is a sort of diary, albeit one written in *very* bizarre ideograms.

BUT, but, but...the damn thing just isn't funny. It's hard to pinpoint why, but this issue just doesn't work. Maybe Winky-man is simply *too* silly. Maybe Couture is too much of a cliche. Maybe Gerber isn't really conversant enough with the world of fine art to do a proper job on the pomposities of the gallery scene.

The good news: This issue introduces Gene Colan to the title. He was to have a long run. He remains *the* artist for Howard the Duck.


From the time of his hatching, he was...different. A potentially brilliant scholar who dreaded the structured environment of school, he educated himself on the streets, taking whatever work was available, formulating his philosophy of self from what he learned of the world about him. And then the Cosmic Axis shifted, and that world changed. Suddenly, he was stranded in a universe he could not fathom. Without warning, he became a strange fowl in an even stranger land.
STAN LEE PRESENTS:
HOWARD THE DUCK!
WRITTEN BY STEVE GERBER
ILLUSTRATED BY GENE COLAN & S. LEIALOHA INKER
A. KAWECKI, LETTERER
MICHELE W. GALPERIN
MARV WOLFMAN EDITOR
THE SLEEP OF THE JUST
I CAN'T HANDLE NEGRO FALL IN FEAR! BOTH OF THEM!



HOWARD THE DUCK 5

"I Want Mo-o-oney!"

Writer	Steve Gerber
Penciller	Gene Colan
Inker	Steve Leialoha
Editor	Archie Goodwin
Letterer	Irv Watanabe
Colorist	Michelle Wolfman

STORIES

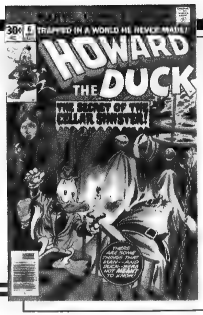
Howard and Beverly are down to their last fifty cents. She can always go back to posing for life drawing classes — but what kind of work can *he* get? Howard reasons that the media might be interested in a talking duck — but when he lands a gig as a second banana on a children's television show, he can't resist the temptation to punch out the insipid host, on camera. The duck then gets a job with an appliance firm, harassing credit customers for their overdue payments. Unfortunately, the first hard luck story he hears breaks his heart so utterly that he decides to quit. Dejected, he skims that evening's newspaper, and comes upon an ad promising $10,000 dollars to any man who can last three rounds with wrestling champion Emile "The Goat" Klout. Howard is confident of victory — and, against all odds, actually achieves it in that night's match. Ah, but the ad promised $10,000 to any *man*... Howard misses the prize, but the promoters pay him a portion of the money anyways, to insure that he won't inform the papers that a duck got their "Goat."

* * * *

This issue demonstrates how the series is concerned with the mentally impoverished, the crazed. (Speaking of crazed, the Kidney Lady makes a return in this issue.) Let other Marvel characters concern themselves with righting wrongs, avenging injustice, and saving the world; Howard simply wants to figure out a way to make a living while maintaining his dignity.

Early on, Beverly has a strange and charming scene—in the depths of poverty, she suddenly grabs Howard nad says, "Wait, I have an idea. Let's get rich! Let's make a million dollars and go off where nobody can find us and rule the world!" Howard reminds her that she makes only $2.10 an hour as a model...When I first read the exchange, it struck me as utterly bizarre—but as I grew older, I discovered girlfriends really *do* have a tendency to make just that sort of outburst, and at the damndest times. Nobody knows why. Scientists have studied the problem for years.

WELL, THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE FREE—BUT YOU CAN SAVE 'EM TO THE BANK, AN' BEES--
I WANT MO-O-ONEY!
BY STEVE GERBER
LETTERER
MICHELLE WOLFMAN
COLORIST



HOWARD THE DUCK 6

"The Secret House of Forbidden Cookies"

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....John Costanza

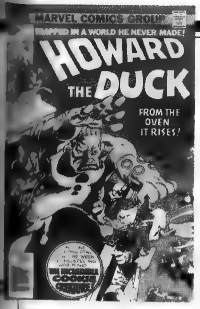
Howard and Beverly are hitch-hiking to New York. Unfortunately, it's late, it's raining, and the pair are stranded somewhere in the middle of the Poconos — all because Howard refused to extinguish his cigar to please their last driver. Beverly gets furious with the Duck, and stalks off — they're through, quits. Howard's tempted to call her back, but pride gets the better of him.

Beverly makes her way to a Victorian mansion; a little girl answers the door and assumes Beverly to be the new governess. Howard sleeps outdoors (it is, after all, weather for ducks). The next morning, he is discovered by members of Reverend June Moon Yuc's religious cult, who assume that Howard is a harbinger of the apocolypse. Howard is saved from these fanatics by a strange figure on horseback — one Heathcliff Rochester, broker for Seven Gables Realty Corp., who just happens to be selling the mansion at which Beverly now works.

Howard and Beverly are reunited; they patch up their argument. We learn that the little girl and her insane mother are regularly attacked by suspicious townspeople. We learn that Reverend Yuc (who now appears on the scene) has offered to buy the residence and transform it into a religious retreat for his Yuccies. And we learn that Patsy — the odd little girl whom Beverly obstensibly "governs" — is baking a ten-foot tall gingerbread man in her equally brobdinagian "Suzy Homemaker oven." She pulls a switch on this device — a bolt of electricity shoots through the cookie-man — and "five yeasty fingers...rise up angry!"

At one point in this story, Heathcliff thinks that Howard, not Yuc, is the religious leader who wants to buy Dragonworth mansion, leading the not-so-good Reverend to scream "You're making a terrible mistake! ...*I'm* the Second Coming! *He's* just a stupid duck!" Gerber has a genuine talent for creating absolutely insane lines of dialogue that seem strangely logical in the context of the story. Laurel and Hardy often used the same sort of verbal humor; I remember one film in which Oliver politely informed a telephone caller "Pardon me, my ear is full of milk." The line seems so sensible at the time (you have to see the movie to understand why) that you almost don't realise how odd it must sound to the fellow on the other end.

At any rate, the best thing about this issue is the perfect way it captures the argot and mind-set of the religious fanatic. We can only wonder why more space didn't go to Yuc and Co. Perhaps the single funniest panel in the book's entire run comes on page 10: The Yuccies, having stumbled across the bizarre, duck-shaped creature, begin muttering among themselves; Howard can only hear these snatches of their conversation: "...The last days..." "...Satan..." "...Revelations..." "...kill it?"



HOWARD THE DUCK 7

"The Way the Cookie Crumbles" and "Get Down America!"

Writer.....Steven Gerber
Penciller.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....Jim Novak
Colorist.....Marie Severin
Editor.....Archie Goodwin

STORIES

Two stories this issue. The first finishes up the previous storyline: Howard eats a leg off the Gingerbread Monster; it crashes into little Patsy's electrical apparatus; an explosion follows; everybody dies except Howard and Beverly.

Chapter 2: The pair finally reach New York, having hitched a ride from Dreyfus Gultch, wealthy country-western singer and scheduled guest at a presidential party convention. No, not the Republican or Democratic Party — this is the All-Night Party, and they have jobs for Howard and Bev: he becomes a security guard, while she becomes a hospitality girl.

Howard's tasks seem light enough — besides, his supervisor never supervises too closely, being preoccupied with seducing Beverly's co-workers. Howard spends most of his time telling the delegates how to conduct their business. But he knows that more important things are stirring. A mysterious bellboy hands Howard a series of bizarre notes, which detail a recipe for baked Alaska, but hint at something more sinister. Suddenly, the answer hits Howard: the Alaskan delegation's standard hides a bomb. The duck, deciding that he can't knowingly let even a politician get killed, saves the life of the All-Night Party's nominee — who promptly bows out, deciding that Presidential politics is just too dangerous. The party chooses a replacement—Howard.

*****

Gerber finally works his "Howard the Duck for President" theme — which he had been shamelessly pushing (along with buttons, posters, etc.) in the letters pages for months — into the storyline. Alas, the political wit and wisdom here is pretty tepid stuff.

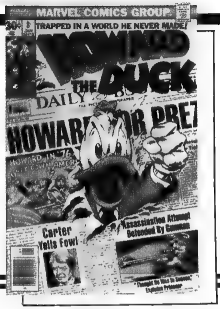
MARVEL TREASURY EDITION

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Sal Buscema

We don't see these Treasury editions anymore — they were to comics what Magnascope was to the movies: the same thing, only bigger. Actually, some artists benefitted from having their work reproduced in this larger format (take a peek, for example, at Alfredo Alcala's work on Marvel's **The Land of Oz**). Other artists' work suffered when magnified. Sal Buscema, who drew the lead story here, is in this second category.

I don't wanna talk about this story very much. Let's just note that Howard meets the Defenders, passes up a chance to return to his home planet, has a second, quite brief, run-in with Spider-Man, and generally ignores his presidential campaign. There's also a quartet of inept super-villains, one of whom is quite memorable: The Black Hole, unhappy possessor of the world's most disgusting super-power. It's better seen than described, so you should at least thumb through this issue.

Actually, you should buy it — the bulk of the book is devoted to reprints of Howard's first appearances, in Fear, Giant-sized Man-thing, and the first issue of his own book. One-stop shopping for all your early-day-Duck needs.


MARVEL COMICS GROUP
TRAPPED IN A WORLD HE NEVER MADE!
THE DAILY DUCK
HOWARD FOR PRES
Carter Veils Fowl
Assassination Attempt Defeated By Gunmen

HOWARD THE DUCK 8

"Open Season"

Writer.....Steve Gerbe
Artist.....Gene Cola
Inker.....Steve Leialoh
Letterer.....I. Watanab
Colorist.....Jan Cohe
Editor.....Archie Goodwi

The events in this issue directly follow those of **Marvel Treasury Edition 12**.

Candidate Howard finds himself the target for innumerable assassination attempts. Even worse: he discovers that the firm of G.Q. Studley, hired by the All-Night Party to handle the Duck's campaign, has painted an entirely false picture of Howard — or, rather, *several* false pictures, in an effort to make the candidate appear to be all things to all people. Howard despises these tactics, and replaces the Studley firm with something called "Mad Genius Associates."

The new approach: tell the truth. Use unbridled candor — no matter whom it antagonizes. The public is impressed — but few people expect Howard to survive until election day. Yet survive he does, despite the explosives tossed toward him, despite the girders falling on him, despite the runaway cars chasing after him — despite, most of all, the wrath of Capitalism Inc., which had sought to buy Howard out.

Howard survives all of this—but not the scandal arising from a phoney photograph of him and Beverly together, taking a bubble bath. On the eve of the election, his polls go down the drain.

*****

Would that this issue were funnier. The Howard-for-President gambit should have had a fair number of ha-has in it. Why aren't they there? Two reasons, mainly:

1) Gerber really needed more than 1.7 issues to do this theme properly. Of course, the election itself provided a time limit — but that fact only indicates that Gerber should have started on his storyline sooner. Funny as they were, we didn't really need the Gothic parody or the **Treasury** interlude — not, at least, at that "point in time" (to adopt a phrase from the politics of the day).

2) A code-approved comic book isn't a likely e vironment for any truly pointed political humor, an Marvel — innately culturally conservative, like all i stitutions, — is scarcely going to allow one of the writers to offend a large proportion of the readers (o worse, their parents). All *real* political satire cour such antagonism, of course.

As long as we're on the topic of political satire comics, a few further observations: It's hard remember *any* '70s Marvel comics that took a tru controversial political stand. Bill Mantlo and Dou Moench produced anti-nuclear power storie Englehart's "Secret Empire" series in Captai America provided the comic book gloss o Watergate and the Nixon era. McGregor occasional railed against the CIA. I suppose one could cite oth examples. All they really serve to demonstrate is th Marvel writers tended toward a mushy liberalism some, like Mantlo, venturing further leftward — y generally veiled or compromised their sympathies most of the work they produced.

HOWARD THE DUCK 9

(This story has no title.)

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colon
Inker.....Steve Lelaloha
Letterer.....John Costanza
Colorist.....Michelle Wolfman

STORIES

Howard has lost in his bid for the presidency. Not that *he* cares. But the false photograph rankles the All-Night Party which fears losing its credibility — though if *that's* the case, one wonders why they nominated a duck in the first place), not to mention Beverly, who asks: "What about my reputation? Do you know how long and hard I've worked to convince everybody in Cleveland I was a *good* girl?" (One wonders about *that* statement, too.)

A CIA friend of Dreyfuss Gulch has traced the photograph's origins: Seems the hotel bellboy, who had been skulking around the past two issues, took the pictures — and was paid to do so by unknown forces in Canada, of all places. Howard and Beverly head north to investigate.

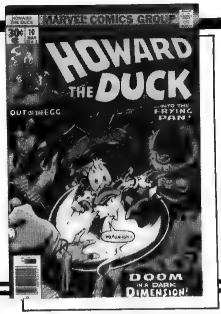
Unfortunately, the duo turn out to be the only passengers on a robot-controlled airplane, which proceeds to crash-land amid the "snow-capped peaks and thick pine woods commonly believed to encircle downtown Toronto." The two survive, and are met by the handsome — and utterly incompetent — Sgt. Preston Dudley of the RCMP. His first words to the crash victims: "Evening folks. Bit of a nasty spill you took there, eh?") Dudley suspects that Howard's the victim of Pierre Dentifris, the only fanatical patriot in all Canada, whose *modus operandi* invariably includes the use of bellboys and robot planes.

The three pay a visit to this Dentifris—an ancient, nearly paralised fellow who, true to his reputation, greets Howard and Beverly with the words "Americans..! I weesh a bellboy would drop luggage on your heads!! I weesh you would die in zee crash of a robot plane!" We learn that, some months back, Dentifris was foiled in his attempt to reverse Niagra Falls by airlifting a million beavers to build a dam across it; soon after this occasion he aged 73 years and lost the use of all his limbs except for his teeth. Howard decides the old man is nuts and rides away. Alas, he ignores Dentifris at his peril...

That night, the bellboy-accomplice attempts to murder Howard with a hatchet. The attack is foiled, but during the melee, Beverly is abducted by beavers. Howard follows the tracks to Niagra Falls, where he meets Dentifris, who is wearing a powerful beaver-shaped exo-skeleton. He has placed Beverly high in a tree and ordered his trained beavers to gnaw at the trunk. She can be saved only if Howard will battle Dentifris on a tightrope high above the falls. Howard comes close to doing just this — then turns back. Even by the Duck's standards, this situation is just too ludocrous to take seriously. His opponent gives chase — and slips off the rope, falling to certain death.

*****

Back on track. One can't really say very much about this issue — it's successful enough to render most commentary superfluous. Only one possible improvement comes to mind — I'd have loved to see the writer's original idea for Dentifris' word balloons completely realised (at first, Gerber wanted all his dialogue to be in both French and English, like the road signs in Canada). Even so, the character's mixture of mis-pronounced English and schoolboy French is frequently hilarious, as is the fantasyland-Canada Gerber concocts out of all our favorite misapprehensions about our northern neighbor. As is Dudley of the Mounties, constantly one step behind his own dog (and why didn't he, or rather they, ever re-appear?). As is the "hate-crazed and maddened" bellhop — who, when asked to be more subtle in his next assassination attempt, answers "I will! I will! I'll be so subtle, he'll barely know he's dead!" In all, this is a Monty Python-esque plunge into absurdity, whith inanities piling atop each other in a strangely logical fashion.



HOWARD THE DUCK 10

"Swan-song of the Living Dead Duck"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....Jim Novak
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

Howard the Duck suffers a nervous breakdown.

All right, so that's *not* much of a plot synopsis. Let's try again:

Fully-formed and cigar in hand, Howard is hatched. A giant fist destroys the egg and scoots Howard into a small, bare room, as Howard's interior voice tells us about the process of socialization. He trips over several tiny human beings, one of whom draws a gun on him. Howard begins stomping on them in an insane fury, when a giant "hirsute" ape named Kong Lomerate squashes Howard with a giant "cancelled" stamp. We next see Howard making his way across the Alps to ask a guru (actually Omega, a now-defunct superhero character Gerber was writing at the time) about the meaning of life. Then the two of them are in a boat on a lake. Then gravity fails and they soar skyward. Howard starts spouting baby-talk as he falls onto an endless plane filled with children's blocks. Beverly is there, and has a truth to proclaim: she swings open her face and reveals a flower in her head — a trick flower which squirts Howard in the eyes. Howard tries to crawl back into the remains of the egg — and wakes up. He goes to get some aspirin, when Spider-Man drips out of the bathroom faucet — Howard, it seems, never really woke up at all. Spider-Man tries to sell Howard on a recent book of pop psychology and...

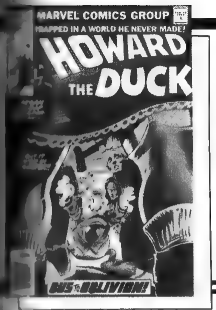
Nope. That approach won't work either. Sometimes a plot defies summary. Sometimes "plot" is a misnomer. Maybe a sample of the dialogue — or, rather, monologue — will better serve to give the flavor of this quasi-story:

"Yep — the world's lookin' good — like a choppin' block should. What? Why am I thinking berserk chimneys like that? Huh? Oh well...a couple of aspirin and some cloud juice oghtta...Rats! No pennies! Guess I'll just have to settle for a glass of piano, then. Waaaugh! That ain't ivory — it's spider-webs!"

Well — that quote gives a pretty fair indication of this issue's proceedings. **HTD** 10 may well be the single most bizarre comic book story in the history of this bizarre medium, and the only possible competitors for that title were all published by the undergrounds. Yet the surrealistic images are bound together by a common theme—society versus the individual, cultural conditioning versus self-preservation, the world versus the womb. Indeed, on a *thematic* level, this is the most comprehensible, consistent, and tightly-knit Howard opus yet published.

But on the *narrative* level, all one can really say about this story, if it is a story, is this:

Howard the Duck suffers a nervous breakdown.



HOWARD THE DUCK 11

"Quack-up"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....Jim Novak
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

STORIES

Howard still hasn't arisen from his motel room bed, where he has been tossing and screaming for days. Beverly calls a doctor; he thinks it's a nervous breakdown. When Beverly starts crying, the Doctor takes her to a restaurant, where they can discuss the matter calmly. While they're gone, Howard awakes, or half-awakes—he's been incessantly tormented by inner voices, which alternately taunt him and shout nonsense words at him. (These words, however, are more for sound than meaning, "attack" Howard throughout this issue, *piano* and *epoxy* being the most frequent besiegers.) Dazed, he rises, dresses, walks to the hotel's office...and spots Beverly in the coffee shop, having tea with the Doctor. Above Howard's head, we see a ghostly drawing of a hatchet splitting a heart open.

Howard spends all his money on a bus ticket, not caring about the destination. He boards without realising that he's heading back to his least favorite city: Cleveland.

On the bus, a malfunctioning seat nearly brains him. Shortly after, he discovers that he's sitting next to a lisping young lady named Winda who is on her way to Cleveland to be exorcised. Then the barrage *really* starts.

It seems that nearly everyone else on the bus is a fanatical evangelist for a variety of different religions, and they all view Howard as choice conversion material. First to confronts Alvin the Gnosticologist, who insists that the Duck buy a book called **Gnosticology: The New Science Of Brain Locksmithing.** Then a man dressed like Jesus tries to sell Howard a book entitled **Martyrdom for the Millions** ("It's all right here, jam-packed with info and *color* photographs!"). A bald-headed man, shouting "Hare! Hare," dances toward Howard, touting *his* new book: **To Sri With Love.** The Duck throws a fit, and dismisses his tormentors — though not the internal ones.

Winda, actually the closest thing to a normal human being this bus has to offer, begins making silly noises and funny faces, a habit which has led her parents to believe her to be possessed by the devil, though Winda simply finds the exercise "vewy thewapeutic." Howard tries to learn this new therapy, when the Kidney Lady (Howard can never board a bus without running into her), certainly the oddest zealot of the bunch, suddenly attacks him. The battle of the belief systems ensues; during the fracas, the bus runs off the road. Howard, Winda and the Kidney Lady are blamed for the brouhaha, and the police cart them off to a mental institution.

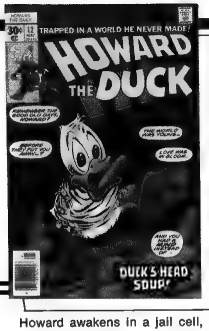
*****

The best single issue in the series, and one of the best comics ever produced.

The Gerber machete was always at its keenest when he hacked at religion. Not *organised* religion — that would probably run afoul of the Code, and, anyway, '70s style street-religion provided a better target. These days, we don't see much of this sort of lumpenprole curb-side belief-mongering, but once upon a time a walk through any heavily-trafficked urban center could bring you face to face with a dozen hucksters for a dozen faiths, each one more gonzo than the last. At the time, I found these untiring vyers for my soul highly irritating. Now I almsot miss them. **HTD** 11 has definite nostalgia value — it reminds us of a time when the fundamentalists had competition, and the Word was spread, not just on the impersonal television screen, but in front of movie theatres, at intersections...and on buses.

Two particularly courageous/outrageous touches in this issue deserve notice. First, there's Howard's "alter ego" — the voice in his head, constantly spouting nonsense words: "Broken dreams." "Repub." "Federal Reserve Note." "Ineffability." "Gooz." "Piano." Can you imagine any Marvel comic — or, for that matter, any film or television script or bestselling novel — using such a radical technique *these* days? Yet you see it on the page and it *works, though you'd be hard-pressed to explain why.*

Second: The Jesus Freak (as they were then known) in this issue is, very obviously, no mere proselyte, but The Man himself. He's never named as such, but as His fellow passenger on the bus says: "He looks so familiar—I think I've seen him on television..." What comics writer would try getting away with something like that nowadays?



HOWARD THE DUCK 12

"Mind-Mush"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerb
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoh
Letterer.....Jim Nova
Colorist.....Janice Coher

Howard awakens in a jail cell, his "inner voices" still tormenting him with non-sequitors. He, Winda, and the Kidney Lady are brought before a judge, who seems quite hostile to the defendants. Winda's story about being possessed by the devil doesn't help her case; surprisingly, however, the Kidney Lady manages to gain the judge's sympathies with her "origin story." (In 1941, she was but an innocent farmer's daughter, until the fateful day when she was seduced by a traveling metaphysical book salesman, who brought her to the big city — Cleveland. There, they had a brief, glamourous affair — then he dumped her, leaving her with only the unpaid hotel bill and a book: **The Human Kidney, Seat of the Soul.**) When the judge excuses K.L., Howard throws a fit — and seals his destiny.

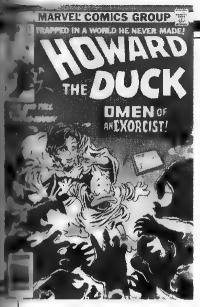
In the Sauerbrauten County Mental Facility, Winda is placed under the care of the ruthlessly efficient Nurse Barbara, while a gargantuan, oafish fellow named Cecil takes charge of Howard. After a brief solitary confinement in an unlit padded cell, Howard becomes so hysterical that he's willing to do anything — incuding swallowing tranquilizers — to get out.

Dr. Avery interviews Winda, and tells her that the address she gave them for her parents home turned out to belong to a vacant lot. "Oh no!" Winda cries. "They put me on the bus — packed up everything, even the house — and moved away! ...The devil possessed me and my em bawassed pawents have fwed — disowned me..." Avery calms Winda, promises to run some tests the next day — and even to call in an exorcist if she wants. Avery sees Howard next — but the duck is so heavily medicated tha his only answer to each question is a bewildered "hah...?"

What happens on the last page of this issue has no rea bearing on the storyline and will not be mentioned in thi book.

*****

Not much occurs in this issue — but it *is* fun. To a cer tain extent, I never wanted to learn about the Kidney Lady' background; I liked picturing her as a bizarre malignan force that had attached itself to Howard's life for no ap parent reason. But her story's really quite funny. As li Howard's by-play with Cecil. Not that these constitute *Shavian* exchanges, but they prove that mid-'70s comi book writers could concoct cleverer dialogue than much o what we hear in films these days.



HOWARD THE DUCK 13

"Rock, Roll Over, and Writhe"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Steve Leialoha
Letterer.....Jim Novak
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

STORIES

The first three pages of this issue are not relevant to the overall storyline, and will not be discussed here.

We meet "Dr. Reich," head of the Sauerbrauten County sanatorium, and though he is never clearly identified as such, we've every reason to believe that he is none other than Adolph Hitler (as he himself puts it in the next issue: "Der von... der only...!"). Meanwhile, Howard and Winda have been locked up together in a padded cell. His tranquilizer having worn off, Howard tells Winda the story of his life: "...Even as a kid I wanted to be a derelict. I liked the hours..."

Dr. Avery has called in his old college chum, Daimon Hellstrom (the alter-ego of Son of Satan) who is to determine whether Winda actually needs an exorcist. Placing his fingers on Winda's forehead, Hellstrom examines her for "precisely 33 heartbeats" — enough time for him to determine that she is completely free of demonic influence. Avery decides to secure Winda's release. But he still doesn't know what to do about Howard, whom he recognizes from the presidential campaign (which no-one else ever does!).

Avery sees Hellstrom to his car — and discovers the parking lot filled with Yuccies — the disciples of Rev. Joon Moon Yuc, last seen in issue 7. Avery assumes that Yuc's presence must be Reich's doing, and rushes back inside the building...

...where things are happening fast: Barbara drags Winda off to be examined by Reich; Howard tries to punch out Cecil; Cecil knocks Howard cold; Reich and Yuc have formalized a partnership; Barbara has taken to wearing black leather to please her beloved Reich. Yuc's torturous "conversion" of Winda is interrupted by Avery and Hellstrom. The latter makes the sign of the Trident — the first stage in his transformation to the Son of Satan. Yuc makes a few magical passes — it seems he's dabbled in demonology too — and sends Hellstrom's "Demonic second self" into the body of poor Howard, who has just stumbled onto the scene.

*****

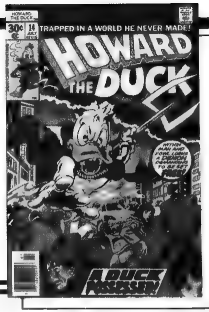
I don't remember much about the **Son of Satan** comics of the '70s — except that I *despised* the character. Poorly conceived, blatantly exploitative, he had nothing to recommend him, not even when Gerber wrote the strip, not even when P. Craig Russell drew a few issues. And now certain Fundamentalist groups are using SOS as Evidence A in their crusade against comics — seems they want to indict an entire medium by flogging a horse ten years dead. (These crusaders maintain that comics are "demon-infested," and are part of an insidious conspiracy to teach our youth dangerous occult concepts. And oh-my-aching-back.)

Yet Gerber retains an affection for the SOS character. "Strangely enough," he now says, "I enjoyed writing the **Son of Satan.** The biggest problem I had with that book had nothing to do with the weaknesses of the character, which were legion..." (choice word, that) "...though I was trying to clean up some of that, trying to explain what the other personality was, how the trident worked, and so on...the real problem was that I was writing **Son of Satan** at the same time I was doing **Morbius the Living Vampire** and **Man-Thing** and **Tales of the Zombie** and all that nonsense, and there are only so many supernatual stories you can tell, I finally had to leave him for that reason. But there were certain things I liked about the character. Didn't like the costume, though."

Actually, the costume looks terrific — on the Duck. In fact, Daimon Hellstrom almost edged into tolerability in these issues of **HTD** — perhaps because **Howard** provided the one fitting home for such a bizarre character.

As for the rest of the issue: the Yuccies make another memorable appearance. "Aw c'mon," says one, "do we look brainwashed to *you*?" — Indeed he does, the way Colan draws him! This comic needed to devote more panels to Yuc and Co., who never got the space they deserved.

And it needed to devote *less* space to rock and roll. Y'see, the problem with including rock idols in a comic book is that comics have a greater shelf life — in the field of music, yesterday's phenomenon is today's embarrassment. Besides, music and comics can never truly mesh. After all, these stories unfold in stereophonic silence. Which may be **HTD** 13's biggest blessing.



HOWARD THE DUCK 14

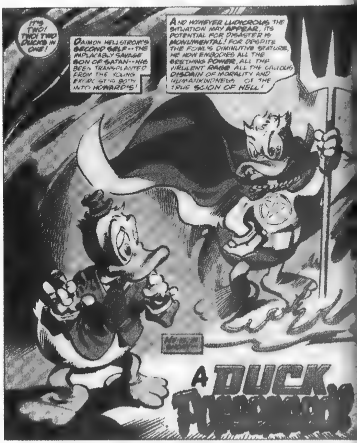
"A Duck Possessed!"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerb
Penciller.....Gene Cola
Inker.....Klaus Janse
Letterer.....Jim Nova
Colorist.....Irene Vartano

Howard the Duck, Scion of Hell, Master of the Soulfire, and looking really cute in his new red costume, frees Winda and flies her to a park some ways away. He then zooms off to find Beverly — who at that moment is in Paul Same's apartment in Cleveland. Howard discovers her, grabs her, says some very rude things to her, and flies off with her.

Winda and Daimon are driving toward Cleveland, which she is sure would be the Duck's first destination... "especiawwy if he had the power to obwiterate it from the map." Howard imprisons Beverly in a ring of soulfire. Suddenly Hellstrom drives onto the scene, and, after a brief scuffle, regains the trident, once more becoming the Son of Satan. Howard's "discarnate self" floats away in a mist and the Duck becomes one with Cleveland. Then S.O.S. puts Howard back together again.

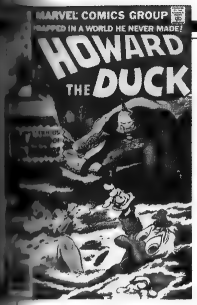
Epilogue: Dr. Avery releases Howard and Winda, who become boarders in Paul Same's apartment. "Dr. Reich" closes up shop at the hospital and moves to Yuc's private university.


IT'S TWO! TWO TWO DUCKS IN ONE!
DAIMON HELLSTROM'S BECOME ONE WITH THE SON OF SATAN--HIS ANCESTRAL POWER HAS BEEN TRANSPLANTED INTO THE CLONE OF MR. SO'S ANTI-HOWARD!
AND HOWEVER LUDICROUS THE SITUATION MAY APPEAR, ITS POTENTIAL FOR DISASTER IS MONUMENTAL! FOR DESPITE THE FOWL'S CONVOLUTIVE STATURE, HE NOW WIELDS THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF ALL THE VIOLENT RAGE, ALL THE CALLOUS DISDAIN OF MORALITY AND HUMANITARIANISM, OF THE TRUE SCION OF HELL!
A DUCK POSSESSED

*****

I mean, I really *hate* the Son of Satan character. He'd have been fine if ever he were allowed to be truly vicious and anti-social, like S. Clay Wilson's Checkered Demon. But in the Marvel Universe, it seems, Old Nick's young'n has a bark much worse than his bite.

On the other hand: we're all a little paranoid about the mental health industry, and making Adolph Hitler the head of a psychiatric hospital was one of the book's nicest — an wickedest — ideas.



HOWARD THE DUCK 15

"The Island of Dr. Bong!"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker/Colorist.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....Irv Watanabe

STORIES

A stray shuffleboard puck knocks Howard over the ...ing of the S.S. Damned, and he has to make the em-...rassing admission that he can't swim. Before Winda ...n effect a rescue, however, a sea serpent wearing a top ...d attacks the ship. Fortunately, the beast has a plate ...ded into its side, bearing the inscription "To give Ser-...nt pleasure, press here." Howard does so; the serpent ...kles, and, quivering with delight, swims toward the ...ston while humming "Neez, neez, neez."

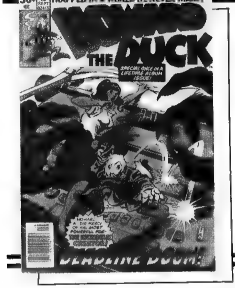
That night, the duck and his friends are guests of honor ...a formal dinner — where, unfortunately, duck a l'orange ...the main course. A sickened Howard rushes outside — ...ere he is met by a storm of Volkswagen-sized rocks, ...ing from the sky. The ship is inundated with this For-...n phenomenon; many are killed; the bridge is a sham-...e. Howard and friends survive this onslaught, and spot ...nd — a bell-shaped island where there ought to be ...thing atol. As the ship approaches this dubious haven, ...ear-splitting "bong" sound fills the air. One of the giant ...ks splits open, and a concrete swan flies out, carrying ...verly and Howard to the island.

The swan deposits the duck and his girlfriend in a bed of ...icksand, from which they are rescued by a group of ...renge reptilian creatures who like to repeat the word ...eez." Somehow affiliated with these man-beasts, is a yellow thingie with webbed feet, a duck's head and the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger. "You're a duck!" cries Howard (proving he can dish it out as well as take it) — to which the stranger replies, "I was...until the doctor gave me *neez*." We soon meet this doctor: Doctor Bong.

*****

Gerber's own commentary on this issue renders my words superfluous. "This whole issue," he says, "came from dreams. Some things were changed. In the dream it was a dachshund that had the button — actually, the dachshund had a flesh-and-blood head and fore-feet and a porceline body, and on the body was a little sign that read 'to give dog pleasure, push button.' The rocks falling from the sky — all that stuff — also came from dreams."

Yet the story reads fairly conventionally, despite its origins, and despite any impression you might have gleaned from the summary above. "Conventional" by the Duck's standards, of course. I feel compelled to ask, though, just how Howard and Co. afforded their formal attire, despite their perpetually impoverished state. Now *that* subverts logic much more drastically than those falling rocks...



HOWARD THE DUCK 16

"Zen and the Art of Comic Book Writing"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerb
Letterer.....Irv Watanat
Colorist...Doc Martin (read: Anonymous. "Dr. P.H. Martin
.....is the brand name of the dyes which are often used
.....coloring comics pages
Production.....Ed Hannigan and Nelson Yomto
Artists......"Cast of Thosands"...specifically
Gene Colan...page 1 (reprint of the last page of **HTD 15**)
Alan Weiss....pages 2 and 3 Al Milgrom.....pages 16&1
Ed Hannigan..pages 6 and 7 John Buscema. pages 22&2
Dave Cockrum..pages 10&11 Dick Giordano..pages 26&2
Tom Palmer....pages 14&15 Nasser/Austin.....page 3

The infamous all-text fill-in issue. Readers despised it. Comics professionals never spoke highly of it. Gerber acts a tad embarrassed about it. I enjoyed it...somewhat.

Here's what happened: The book was destined to go reprint. Gerber had gotten *way* behind, due to the **HTD Annual** and the "Kiss" comic he'd produced. But this was only issue 16 — readers probably already owned any reprintable issues. The solution: instant comics — if, indeed, this *is* a comic — scribbled by Gerber onto yellow legal pads while en route from New York to Las Vegas, and shipped to New York, where various artists illustrated each "chapter" with a two-page spread.

These chapters are labelled as follows:

I. writers are like people
II. turn left at the fork in the tongue
III. obligatory comic book fight scene
IV. ...and visions of sugar plums
V. (mis-marked "VI." in the text) tell the people a story
VI. commentary and analysis
VII. fan letter

Personally, I was not adverse to the idea of an all-text issue when **HTD** 16 first appeared. Far from it — I was delighted. Now *here* was a truly outrageous notion, a loud Bronx cheer in the face of conventional wisdom. But, an essay has to have a topic. Gerber never defines his argument clearly; he's afraid to. So he spends page after page skirting around the unmentionable, never addressing the theme directly.

What's the issue here? Just what is the writer so afraid to come to grips with? I think **HTD** 16 is Gerber's unconscious *apologia*, his self-flagellation for not having dragged his comic book character — of whom he's quite fond—into the realm of Art. Or at least the realm of 'respectable' entertainment.

For Howard, Gerber asserts in Chapter I, has potential. He's adaptable. Malleable. He resists the forces that would turn him into an institution. Gerber implies, but does not state, that these forces have already done their dirty work on other Marvel characters. (In interviews, he's more direct: "Marvel's in the fossil business; they just don't know it.") Howard's a renegade — which makes him a character one can believe in.

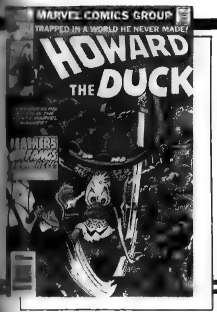
So what, according to Gerber, gets in the way of all this potential? He points, in succeeding chapters, toward several possible culprits. Maybe it's the fact that this is, after all, a *Marvel comic book*; the audience is narrowed and has certain narrow expectations (for example, it demands an "action" scene each issue). Or maybe Gerber really doesn't have so much to say as he pretends to. Or maybe he *does* have important points to make, but can't make them with the sort of spontaneity the creative process demands. Maybe the very business of making ends meet of being responsible to one's commitments, decimates the creative spark. Maybe...

Maybe Gerber's being too hard on himself, in HTD 16. After all, he produced the best comic of the '70s, and a character that a lot of people took to heart. Most importantly, he spoke with an original voice. There's really no need for this sort of whimpering *mea culpa* over his inability to push Howard onward into some sort of para-Art that will cleanse and purify us all.

Or maybe Gerber's not being hard *enough*. After reading this issue, one feels that he feels that Howard could make some bigger statement, could reach a wider audience, than circumstances allow. But he couldn't *really* rail against those circumstances in full force. This issue steers clear of any real moment-of-truth revelations about the practical and psychological obstacles separating the creator from his vision. After all, *that* sort of searching analysis brings one damn near the realm of the pop psychologist, and Gerber has consistently voiced his hatred of the "Culture of therapy" and its insidious lingo. (Ah, but aren't we all most bothered by those sins which most strongly tempt us?)

So **HTD** 16 is a failure — and not simply because it was formally odd, or because it was written in a white heat. Its problem, paradoxically, is that it goes both too far and not nearly far enough. Gerber wants to address subjects comics have never addressed—but he's afraid to look his subject squarely in the eye. He wants to create a boldly self-reflective work, but he's afraid of the reflection.

And by-the-by — he doesn't know the first thing about Latin pronounciation. That doesn't stop him from attempting a pun in that language on page 26.



HOWARD THE DUCK 17

(This issue has no title.)

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....A. Kaweckl
Colorist.....Janice Cohen

STORIES

In the castle of Doctor Bong, Howard and Beverly are separated, Bev to learn the good Doctor's secrets (he seems to know her already), Howard to recuperate from one of the Doctor's "bongs." (It seems this villain can incapacitate an opponent by striking his dome at just the right pitch.) A duck-faced French maid — one of Bong's experiments — serves Howard a good meal and a cigar.

Meanwhile, on the **S.S. Damned** — the attack of falling rocks turns out to have been merely an illusion. Still, when Mr. Bong suddenly appears to warn the ship's Captain against trying to rescue Howard and Beverly, the Captain heeds his threats and sails on.

Back at the castle: at a dinner served by a highly-evolved giraffe, Bong tells Beverly his story. He was once Lester Verde, an overweight youngster, constantly taunted by his peers. He got his revenge by writing down choice insults ("Marky...is...a...poo-poo brain..."), the beginning of Bong's career as an "assassin." The boy scribbler became a journalism major, though Verde's brand of yellow journalism horrified his professor. Verde engineered the professor's dismissal on a trumped-up drug charge. He planned to do the same to the dean and the chancellor — but he was sidetracked by his crush on Beverly, a model in his life-drawing class. Beverly rebuffed him — she already had a boyfriend, named David; Verde got his revenge by telling David's parents that their son was dating a *shiksa*.

Later, Verde became one of the best-known writers for such publications as **The Supermarket Enquirer**. Later still, he went on tour with "the most outrageous rock group of the early '70s," whom he secretly planned to attack in a subsequent paperback book. Unfortunately, an accident during one of this group's stage presentations causes Verde's hand to be caught in a guillotine.

There the story ends — Bong has pledged to reveal the rest of it only to his wife — that is, Beverly. "What?" she exclaims. "Marry *you*? Jeez — marry *anybody*?" Unfortunately, this is just what she must do — in order to save Howard's life.

*****

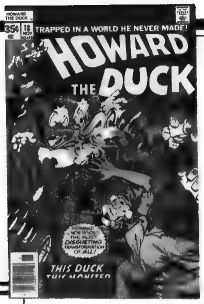
"Dr. Bong," says Gerber, "was based on a now very famous reporter named Bob Greene. Bob Greene got me really pissed off at one point. He had done an article on the 'Kiss' comic that we did, and he asked me a typical 'therapy-culture' question — did I think that kids were going to emulate these guys who wear weird make-up and stick their tongues out a lot, and so on, and what did I think their parents were going to feel about it. And I made some silly comment about how the kids already had the albums around the house, so what difference could a comic book make? Parents would probably take one look at it and go back to watching *Happy Days*.

"Now he took that quote out of context and changed the tone of it — which you can very easily do — to make me seem to be someone who thought that parents were all boobs. And I got *really* mad. So I wrote this story about Lester Verde — Green, obviously, as the origin of Doctor Bong.

"Strangely enough, Bob Greene's brother was a **Howard** fan, and sent Bob a copy of the comic. After he read it, he sent me a letter telling me how much he enjoyed the book, and how it had always been his dream to be a comic book character.

"The name 'Doctor Bong' came from one evening when I was at Gene Simmon's house (Simmons was then famous/infamous as a member of Kiss) looking through some fan mail. And someone had written in, from Flint, Michigan or wherever, saying 'Stop in anytime, we'll have some rock and roll and some good bonging.' And neither of us had heard of the term before. Had no idea what it meant. But 'Bong' struck me as a funny name for a villain."

Actually, Mr. Simmons' correspondent was probably referring to a piece of drug paraphenalia called a "bong," more properly spelled "bahng." Or so I've been told by those less innocent of the drug culture than I.



HOWARD THE DUCK 18

"Metamorphosis"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....Irv Watanabe
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

Bong intends to "evolve" Howard in his evolvo-chamber; Beverly attempts to save him, but only speeds up the process. But the duck-like French maid Fifi takes advantage of Bong's absence to rescue Howard; she spirits him off to another part of the castle.

Beverly tries to escape — only to learn that Dr. Bong has somehow transported his retreat to the high Himalayas. Bong finds her, and announces that the time has come for the marriage ceremonies.

That's not the only big transition: Howard suddenly evolves into a full-fledged human being. "No!" he cries upon first glance into the mirror. "I—I've joined the enemy!"

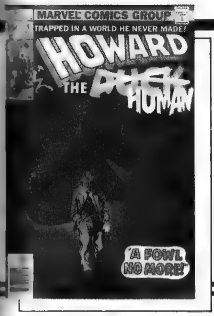
Meanwhile, Dr. Bong appears on a Soviet trawler that has accidentally wandered within the U.S.'s territorial waters. Bong promises not to alert the authorities—if the captain of the ship will marry him and Beverly.

Fifi finds Howard the Human some properly fitting clothes and a cigar. She also has a plan for escape. Soon, the two are hovering over New York in a craft called a "Flying Burger." A jet fighter, assuming the craft to be some sort of UFO, shoots it down. It crashes in the midst of Central Park. Fifi dies; Howard, through the miracle of being a continuing character, survives.

*****

This is all very amusing, I suppose—but somehow, this issue looks *too* much like the standard Marvel product. Fortunately, things would be properly un-standard again in the very next installment.

From the time of his hatching, he was different. A potential victim in the hard school of who dreaded the strange
environment of school, he educated himself in the streets, taking whatever work was available to support
his philosophy of self from what he learned of the world about him. And then the Cosmic Axis shifted
that world changed. Suddenly, he was stranded in a universe he could not fathom. Without warning,
became a strange land, as an even stranger land.
STAN LEE PRESENTS: HOWARD THE DUCK
STEVE GERBER • GENE COLAN • KLAUS JANSON • IRV WATANABE LETTER
JAN COHEN COLOR
METAMORPHOSIS
THE EVOLVO-CHAMBER OF CASTLE BONG
MYSTERIOUSLY REMINISCENT OF A STERN AND PUNITIVE BELL MOTIF, TIME SHALLOWS HALL WITH ITS DISTANT, TINNY, CHILLING PRESENCE. MOMENTARILY STUNS THE BAND OF HOWARD... THE DUCK!
NO, NO, MY DEAR BEVERLY... I SHOULD NOT PERISH!
B-BUT YOU SAID NOTHING WOULD HAPPEN TO HIM!
I LIED... TO MARRY YOU.



HOWARD THE DUCK 19

"Howard the Human"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Penciller.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....Irv Watanabe
Colorist.....P. Rache

STORIES

"Penniless, friendless, alone in his despair," — which is to say, quintessentially *human* — Howard the Hairless Ape shambles through the streets of Manhattan, looking very much like a standard NY derelict. His only spot of good luck is finding a five-dollar bill in the street. Cleaning himself off in a Port Authority bus terminal restroom, he meets Mad Dog, a giant "struggling artist" who has been dealing with transcience a lot longer than Howard. Mad Dog wants Howard to buy him a cup of coffee; unfortunately, the manager of the cafeteria refuses to serve the two. Mad Dog goes mad, destroying the restaurant in a frenzy. This outburst interrupts a sickeningly "sensitive" fellow named Elton, who becomes outraged at the huge derelict: "You're insane — no, worse — *insensitive*! Amy and I were *relating*!" Mad Dog and Elton begin pummelling each other; Howard decides to ignore the whole matter and walks away.

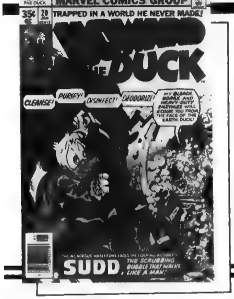
Unfortunately, there's no ignoring Amy, who tackles Howard, and begs him to escort her away from Elton. Seems she's none too fond of Mr. Me Generation; as she later explains to Howard in her apartment, she and Elton were both laid off at the same time, and he mistook her attempts to console him for something much more profound. She'd prefer someone who didn't idolize her, didn't feel that women were somehow the font of all truth — someone, perhaps, like Howard. Only thing *he* needs is a shave...

Next morning: Elton, who has maintained an obsessive vigil outside Amy's apartment for hours, decides to burst through her door and declare his love ("I can't let her suffer in the arms of some stranger — I respect her too much. ...*Amy*! Let me in! I bleed with you..!") Amy isn't so shocked by Elton's intrusion as they both are to see Howard — for he has regained his duck-hood. More shocking still: Dr. Bong suddenly appears in the apartment.

*****

A very nice issue indeed — I only wish the Howard the Human storyline could have been extended for another month or two. "Unfortunately," Gerber says, "the main attraction of the book was the fact that the character was a duck. Who knows? It might have been interesting if he had remained a human forever. But this is one of my favorite issues — he becomes human and he still runs into Don McGregor! Nothing changes; people treat him exactly the same. And he's just as miserable."

Indeed, this issue is basically a better version of **HTD 2** — again, Howard sleeps with the girlfriend of one of those obnoxiously self-conscious, quintessentially 1970s chaps who takes himself far too seriously. Of course, these events do strain credibility somewhat...homeless Howard is quite a disheveled sight indeed, and it's hard to imagine him landing, or being landed by, a cutie like Amy on his first night back in the big town.



HOWARD THE DUCK 20

"Scrubba-dub Death"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....J. Costanza
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

Howard manages to escape from Doctor Bong — but that still leaves him wandering the streets, penniless, friendless, and even clothes-less. He steals a T-shirt that's been left out to dry (to Howard's humiliation, it has "Foxy Lady" written across the front). An all-night diner is looking for a dishwasher; Howard snatches the job.

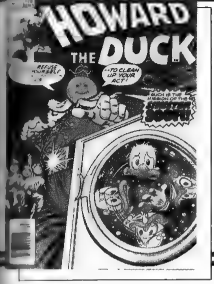
Howard learns the ropes from a beefy sub-prole named Sudd, who plans to give up the dishwashing game: Seems he's received an offer to become an Executive Vice President of SOOFI — Save Our Offspring From Indecency, a Moral Majority-type organization. Alas, on this, his last night on the job, Sudd makes his first mistake: He leaves the can of foam oven cleaner in the microwave. He turns on the oven; the can explodes in a burst of radioactive foam — and Sudd becomes a giant bubble monster, intent on scrubbing the neighborhood clean of all "impure" influences.

Fortunately, the makers of the oven cleaner have forseen just this sort of circumstance, and have conscientiously provided an antidote on the back of the can. Howard mixes up some vinegar, lemon juice, egg whites — and soon has a potion that can decimate Sudd. One drenching and Sudd's bubbles burst, leaving nothing but a sparkling white street — emblazoned with Sudd's tattoo.

*****

Howard at his most appealing — struggling to make a buck, and to keep others from shoving their beliefs down his throat.

Stan Lee PRESENTS: HOWARD THE DUCK
STAN GERBER WRITER/EDITOR
GENE COLAN PENCILS
KLAUS JANSON INKS
J. COSTANZA, ETTE JAN COHEN COLOR
HERE LIES A DUCK WHO WAS NOT AFRAID TO BE HIMSELF
CLEANSER! PURIFY! DISINFECT! SAVLON!!
AND THE FIEND DECIDING TO BE HIMSELF, HOWARD HAS MORE TIME TO SPEND WITH DR. BONG!
YOU'RE GOING TO BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF
SCRUBBA-DUB-DUB
ARE YOU SURE YOU KNOW HOW TO DRIVE?!



HOWARD THE DUCK #21

"If You Knew Soofi..."

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Carmine Infantino
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....I. Watanabe
Colorist.....Glynis Wein

STORIES

The SOOFI, we learn, consider themselves to be the "death commandos of love," sworn to die that children unborn may live in antiseptic peace. Each member wears a sparkling white Janitor's uniform and a bright orange globe over the head — and each globe bears a smiley-face instead of human features. Their brooms come equipped with plastic explosives; the SOOFI *modus operandi* is to invade adult movie theatres, rock concerts, pornographic book stores, etc., and blow both the offending establishment and themselves to Kingdom come. And they're after Howard — after all, he defeated Sudd, a promising new member.

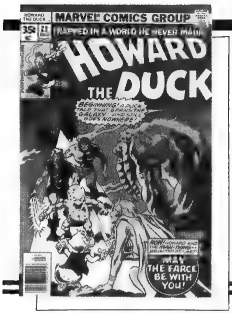
Howard, meanwhile, is holed up in his boss's apartment. The boss, it turns out, is named Beverly Switzler — Lee, for short. Lee decides to head back to Cleveland, but he leaves Howard with food, shelter and $50.00. So much for the *good* luck.

The Supreme Soofi herself appears on Howard's doorstep, spritzes him with a knock-out gas, and absconds with him to her lair. There she explains her organization's recruitment scheme to a revived Howard ("It's seasonal — people are less self-destructive in the summer months — but we have a brisk turnover around Christmas.") She plans to turn Howard into a SOOFI by tossing him into the Blanditron, a combination clothes-washer and brain-washer (The Supreme Soofi received the plans for this device from the Almighty Himself, who appeared to her one day on Miami Beach.) The Blanditron fails; Howard escapes.

The finale of this story identifies — as closely as the libel courts will allow — the Supreme Soofi with Anita Bryant, the Florida orange juice spokeswoman who spearheaded a late-70s anti-homosexuality campaign. This choice of targets placed Gerber in an odd position: How to attack this sort of fanatic in a comic book when the very concept of homosexuality was *verboten* according to the Comics Code? The Supreme Soofi became a more generalised sort of morality-monger — and as a result, **HTD** 231 holds up much better now than it might otherwise, for it isn't tied so directly to the now-forgotten Bryant. In many depressing ways, this comic has gained in relevance over the years, especially in light of the Meese Commission report, the spread of religious fanaticism, etc. Let's hope that ten years from *now* 21 will finally become outdated.

Three small details worth noting. The dialogue perfectly captures the sort of double-speak that fanatics practice so assiduously: "We oppose immorality, not immoral people. So *kill* — with compassion." the SOOFI also have a memorable little poem they recite just before blowing themselves and others to smithereens: "We're the SOOFI, foes of filth/ We're straight, upright, and moral./ We're brave, we're true/Red, white and blue/But most of all...temporal!"

One last item: this issue marks the last appearance of Howard's blue sport coat. (Actually, it shows up only on the cover; in the magazine proper, Howard last appeared in his most familiar outfit in 18.)



HOWARD THE DUCK 22
"May the Farce Be With You"

Writer.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Val Mayerik
Inker.....William Wray
Letterer.....John Costanza
Colorist.....Janice Cohen

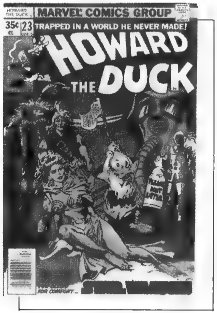
HOWARD THE DUCK 23
"Star Waaugh"

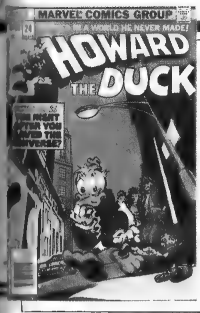
Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....I. Watanabe
Penciller.....Val Mayerik
Colorist.....J. Cohen

No need to deal with these issues separately, or at any length. These two issues deliver the almost-inevitable **Star Wars** parody, and it's all very silly indeed, though to his credit, Gerber tries to push the storyline toward a satire of consumerism and marketing in general.

Suffice it to say that Howard, shortly after being attacked by a giant, limbed salt-shaker and a house-sized house fly, is recruited by Dakimh the sorcerer to join him, Korreck, Man-thing and Jennifer Kale on an outer-space mission to save the universe. Howard is reluctant: "Even if it's true, an' the universe crumbles...so what? Who'd notice?" Despite his extreme cynicism/cowardice, Howard is cajoled into leading the group against Bzzk'Joh and his Imperium Emporium, who plan to bulldoze the universe and build on its ruins a "shopping center unrivalled in its crassness." There's a battle on something called The Deth Store. The good guys win.

...Which is as much of a plot synopsis as I care to spend on these not-terribly-successful issues. True, there are a few good lines, and I liked the surreal arch-capitalist Mack, whose head is a giant hamburger bun. But for the most part, the heavy-handed jibes at the merchandising mentality coalesce uneasily with the **Star Wars** plot.





HOWARD THE DUCK 24

"Where Do You Go — What Do You Do — The Night After You Save The Universe?"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Tom Palmer
Letterer.....Joe Rosen
Colorist.....Janice Cohen

STORIES

Suffering from severe exhaustion and an even more severe bout of insomnia, Howard the Duck spends the entire night wandering through the streets of New York.

*****

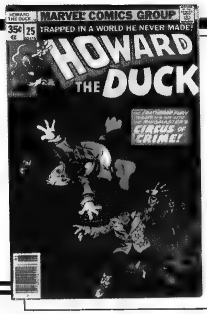
—And that's all the synopsis *this* issue needs. But don't get the idea that this installment is some sort of disaster; far from it. After providing the series with its worst story to date in 22-23, Gerber now delivers one of his very best Duck tales ever.

The finest Howard stories tend to fall into two groups. First, there are the uttetly unreal exercises that pile absurdity upon absurdity — 10, the nervous breakdown issue, and 15, the all-dream issue, being perhaps the two best examples. Second, and to my mind best of all, are the small-scale stories, the ones in which fantasy plays little or no part — the issues which strain our suspension of disbelief as little as is possible. (Of course, in a book alled **Howard The Duck**, some disbelief is inevitable!) Good examples of this approach can be found in 5, 11 and the present issue. Indeed, this story is almost *too* believable, *too* mundane. Anyone who has ever prowled the city streets on a sleepless night (and I've done it plenty of times myself, being a chronic insomniac) can probably tell you half-a-dozen anecdotes far stranger than anything you'll find in this comic.

The "plot" seems, at first, almost non-existent; still, Gerber assembles his collection of incidents with great care. Indeed, one of the assorted nuts Howard runs into — the bag lady — goes so far as to assert: "I'm symbolically significant to your story! I'm integral to the thematic structure..." And this is no idle boast. She mistakes Howard for her long-lost scoundrel of a son, Eben — just as, earlier, a wino saw him as his long-lost Marie, "the girl of his D.T.s," as Howard puts it. Later, Howard receives an obscene phone call at a pay phone — which proves to be as extreme a case of alienation from human experience as one can conceive. He then stumbles between a young couple trying to spice up their deteriorating marriage via a sado-masochistic fantasy in which they pretend to be strangers.

The city, at night, is the domain of thieves and low-lifes and potential murderers — but more than that, it's the domain of lonely people trying to connect. Howard is too cynical/cowardly (that portmanteau term again! Well, it fits his personality...) to 'fess up to his own loneliness now that Beverly is gone; all these various oddballs in the street have to act out his emotions for him. He finally reaches resolution, of sorts — at least, he admits to "some kinda time-gap between a given event an' my feelings about it." Only after he reaches this point can he be re-connected with his friends Paul and Winda, who arrive that morning.

Speaking of whom: they've been en route for nearly *ten months* by this point! In fact, though **HTD** 24 bears a May, 1978 date, a rigorous look at the book's chronology reveals that little more than a month — Duck-time, not our time — can have elapsed since the Presidential campaign of Issue 8. An obvious example of how the Marvel Universe proceeds according to a rhythm far different from that which governs our own world.



HOWARD THE DUCK 25

"Getting Smooth"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....I. Watanabe
Colorist.....Jan Cohen

While on board the S.S. Damned, Paul idly sketched a passenger, who turned out to be one Iris Raritan, fabulously wealthy patron of the arts. She paid $100 for the drawing, and found him 25 similar commissions aboard the ship. (Paul could have painted the Sistene Chapel in the time it took that boat to get home!) $2600 richer, with a booming career before him, Paul begins a whirlwind transformation of his life—everything's to be first class all the way for him, Howard and Winda (though Winda's jealous of Iris).

Howard, Paul and Winda meet Iris at a posh, uptown restaurant. Iris has just been concluding her arrangements with a Mr. Thraller (a.k.a. The Ringmaster), who is to bring his circus to one of her elaborate parties next Friday.

Scene change: The Himalays — Dr. Bong's castle — Beverly having a lonely dinner with a neezed-out reptile. We learn, in the indirect fashion necessitated by the Comics Code, that the Bong and Bev haven't consumated their marriage yet. Enough is enough. Rushing downstairs to the good Doctor's laboratory, she more or less demands sex — and Bong's creatures applaud and shout "Neez!" at their embrace.

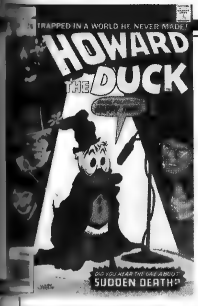
New York: Paul and Winda attend Iris' *soiree*, much to the consternation of her guests. Little do these affluent society folks realize that their *real* troubles will commence with the arrival of the Ringmaster and his Circus of Crime. As is their wont, they hypnotise the crowd and pilfer their valuables. They also abscond with Howard, whom the Ringmaster suspects would be an asset to the troupe.

*****

The Ringmaster trilogy represents Gerber's last stand on the book, as well as his first usage of villains drawn from the conventional Marvel universe. In interviews, Gerber states that he chose the Circus of Crime because they were such a small-potatoes organization; they fit in perfectly with **HTD**'s low-class atmosphere.

As Iris Raritan does not. Unfortunately, Gerber captures proles much more accurately than he does the opulent class. He gives us the middle-brow fantasy of how the wealthy live — not a glimpse of how the world of old money actually operates. Example: one of the circus troupe comments, regarding their take at the party, "These rich folks don't scrimp...not a zircon or Timex in the house!" Would that Gerber could have consulted Paul Fussel's excellent book **Class** (Ballantine, 1983): "The other upper-class watch is the cheapest and simplest Timex, worn with a grosgrain -ribbon strap, changed often; black ones for formal wear are amusing." Similarly, it was a mistake to have Iris wear an evening gown at lunch, and to put her (in the next issue) behind the wheel of a new Corvette instead of an old Buick. TV shows such as **Dynasty** constantly make these same types of errors. Apparently, most folks' notions about the ultra-affluent still come from Thorstein Veblein and '30s movies.

Otherwise, an amusing issue. Winda becomes, here, a more sophisticated and attractive character than ever before — too bad she was written out of the strip for so long.



HOWARD THE DUCK 26

"Repercussions...!"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Gene Colan
Inker.....Klaus Janson
Letterer.....Irv Watanabe
Colorist.....Janice Cohen
Consulting Editor.....Jim Shooter

STORIES

Threatened with severe bodily injury, Howard complies with his orders to open the Ringmaster's show in Skudge, PA, where he proves such a hit that the Boss decides to keep Howard on indefinitely. This is fortunate for Howard, actually: The longer he performs, the longer he lives.

Meanwhile: one Ignatz Hubley belatedly discovers, after a long night's drunkeness, that he was robbed at the Circus; afraid to face his wife, he decides to turn to crime himself. At that same time, Iris, Paul, and Winda are tracking the Ringmaster with a tracing device. Paul realises that she must have planted a tracer on the circus truck; Iris admits foreknowledge of the robbery—she irresponsibly wanted the "thrill" of bringing a criminal to justice. Paul leaves in a huff; shortly after, Iris orders Winda out of her car.

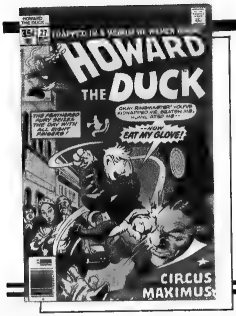
Before Winda can find Paul, she's accosted by a local drunk. Paul, meanwhile, stumbles upon the same gas station that Ignatz has targeted for his first foray in armed robbery — and, to top it all off, the Ringmaster decides to fill-er-up at this same unhappy locaion. A minor apocalypse ensues.

Result: "Two shattered kneecaps for Hubley...Ringmaster gets away...Winda's under heavy sedation with lacerations, bruises and trauma...and they're 'not sure' yet about Paul." All this according to Howard, whose escape is the only fortunate result of the entire incident. He gets to lay the moral out for Iris: "Actions have consequences."

*****

— And for my money, that admonishment comes down a little too baldly. (Yet the **Comics Journal** praised this scene for its subtlety! So much for their can't-be-pleased reputation.) Interesting thing is, Gerber admits that this statement was really directed towards Marvel's management, as a "don't mess with me" warning. If so, it seems he *was* too subtle.

Anyways...do you realise just how *depressing* this issue is? How many other comedy writers would have one continuing character get shot and another raped? I'm assuming rape, though Iris uses the euphemism "beaten up" in the next issue. Even the gag lines have a cynical twist: "Gotta hand it to Ringo — it's a brilliant gimmick. But so were the showers at Auschwitz."



HOWARD THE DUCK 27

"Circus Maximus"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerb
Artist.....Gene Col
Inker.....Klaus Jans
Letterer.....Gaspa
Colorist.....Phil R
Editor-In-Chief.....Jim Shoot

(Note: I assume that "Gaspar" is Gaspar Saladino. No idea who Phil R. might be. Interesting, though, that unexpurgated Gerber lasted only one month into the Shooter reign.)

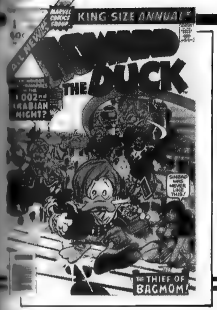
Howard has spent the past few issues complaining about his lack of emotional response toward the highly disorienting events of his life. During the long nightmare sequence that opens this issue, he finally 'gets in touch with his feelings: *He's not negative...he's ANGRY.* He awakes, thirsting for revenge upon the Ringmaster. With Iris' help, he gets it.

*****

The final, ultimate, epic, brain-blasting battle with the R. and his C.of C. is standard Marvel comics fare, and an unfitting farewell to the Authorised Version of the Duck. The opening nightmare sequence interests me more. A surreal courtroom — Howard on trial — Beverly plays judge — a dozen Howards act as jury — and the prosecutor, or persecutor, is the entire world. The charge: terminal negativism. The evidence: a glass of water, which Howard describes as "half-empty" — thereby signaling his own death warrant. "We find the defendant GUILTY AS HELL!" cries the jury. And finally Howard realises just how furious he really is.

At the risk of discomforting both myself and the reader, I'd like to offer a personal note here. When I first read this sequence, I felt singularly sympatico with the Duck. For in this time, mindless optimism had become something of a state religion, having been relentlessly promulgated by certain fundamentalists, by the growing New Right, and (most insidiously) by the pernicious purveyors of pop psychology. A seemingly endless series of anecdote-ridden paperback self-help manuals had jack-hammered home the notion that all one's problems could be solved by a slap-happy cheerful attitude, that "love thyself" should replace "know thyself," that, in short, the worst sin in the world was to say that a glass of water was half-empty instead of half-full. This extreme version of "The Power of Positive Thinking" was all a scam, of course, much like Professor Harold Hill's "think" system of musical education in **The Music Man.** I think it actually made people *more* depressed — if only because we all suddenly felt constrained to keep a smile on our faces, even if it meant taping our cheeks up.

How refreshing, then, and how cathartic, to see Howard fighting for the right to be captious, to be mean-spirited, to be outraged by fortune's slings and arrows. "I'm not negative — *I'm angry!*" screams Howard, scowling demonically, smoke pouring out of every orifice in his body. My feelings exactly. And, I suspect, the feelings of a lot of other readers as well.



HOWARD THE DUCK ANNUAL 1

"Thief of Bagmom"

Writer/Editor.....Steve Gerber
Artist.....Val Mayerik
Letterer.....Joe Rosen
Colorist.....Jan Cohen
Co-scenarist.....M. Skrenes

STORIES

The Duck has been cooped up with Paul, Winda and Beverly for some time, and he's slowly going crazy again. The others go out of their way to be nice to Howard, in order to prevent a relapse; their forebearance and patronizing attitude only make the Duck's behavior worse.

All these matters become moot, however, when Winda, merely by saying "wigid" (her pronounciation of the word "frigid"), causes a newly-purchased oriental rug to fly out the window and beyond the horizon — with Beverly and Winda aboard. Then Howard and Paul are attacked by Arabian guards; during the melee, the attackers fall out the window (they're five stories up). They've left a lamp behind; Paul rubs it, voicing a wish to be brought to Winda and Beverly. At that moment, a radio station calls, offering Howard a trip to the country of Bagmom if he can name someone buried in Grant's tomb.

IN Bagmom: the carpet flies into the palace, and the girls are met by the Caliph (a tradition-minded chieftan) and his western-oriented son, Hassim. Wijid, the court wizard, disagrees with the Caliph's plan to make the girls part of his harem: "The Americans are... *sensitive* about such matters as abductions of nationals."

Paul and Howard parachute into Bagmom, and, after another rub of the lamp, become fluent in the local lingo. This allows them to ally themselves with master thief Ali Wazoo, who takes them to the hideaway of Abu Ho Dadi, the sworn enemy of Prince Hassim (The Caliph's westernized son — remember?). Hassim, it seems, has schemes to sell Bagmom's interests out to the Roxxon Oil Corporation...

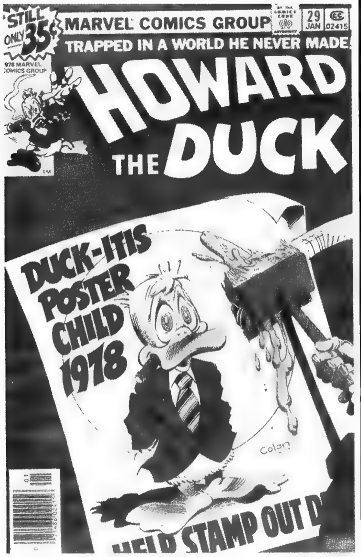
*****

...Oh, why go on? This story is *very* silly, even by **HTD**'s standards. It's also pretty funny, but any attempt at summary kills the humor, which occurs mostly in puns and side remarks. In short, this is Duck Lite — a meaningless amusement, in which Arabian Nights cliches collide with the realities of the modern Middle East. By all means, read "Thief of Bagmom" — but let's not analyse it.

I suppose we *can* talk about Val Mayerick, who here drew the Duck for the first time since his initial appearance. Mayerick draws a very ratty-looking duck indeed, and the supporting cast looks rather disheveled as well. This warts-'n-all approach to draughtsmanship (heavy on the warts) probably accounts for Mayerick's unpopularity with some fans — though his sometimes-awkward compositions also don't help. (He continually cuts off his figures at mid-shin, for some reason. ('Course, John Byrne often makes the same mistake, and it hasn't hurt *his* following!) Yet I'm very fond of Mayerick's seedily realistic approach; in his way, he's found the perfect meeting place between the Marvel house style and the art found in underground comics. Which makes him a natural for the Duck.

...Perhaps you'll want to know how this issue turns out: Howard's coin-operated plastic flying donkey knocks Hassim's WWI bi-plane out of the skies and into Israel. Our heroes are sent home in the S.S. Damned, which doesn't reach New York until **HTD 24** (some ten months later). The genie of the lamp prudishly refuses to grant Paul's final wish, which seems to have involved Winda.

AFTER THE FALL



Howard left us forever in the summer of 1978. Alas, Marvel couldn't recognise a dead duck when it saw one, and spent a year or two propping up the corpse, trying to get it to speak and waddle the way it used to.

28 and 29 were interregnum issues. The **Howard** comic strip's delays and deadlines resulted in Gerber asking for one fill-in story, and Marvel asking for another. Neither is much good; neither seems truly connected to what came before.

Marv Wolfman plotted 28 "Cooking With Gas" with Mary Skrenes providing dialogue and Gerber editing. The plot has something to do with the Army testing an experimental nerve gas on an unwitting populace; we see paranoid Generals raving about the Communist menace, apathetic civilian/victims, quasi-insane CIA operatives spying within our borders, and so on. Carmine Infantino, who'd turned out some very nice work in issue 21, here contributes the weakest art the Duck's ever been saddled with.

Mark Evanier plotted 29, and Gerber typed out the words. "Help Stamp Out Ducks" proved no improvement: An out-of-luck Las Vegas comedian decides to broadcast a Jerry Lewis-style telethon for a non-existant disease— "Poultritis Ampelopsis," of which Howard (a partner in the scam) is allegedly the victim. This issue contains a few passable gags, and not much else. Will Meugniot provided some highly elaborate, highly *odd* artwork — his version of the Duck looks like no-one else's. Not bad, but not my cup of tea.

And, yes, it *could* get worse.

I do not say that the other **HTD** writers lacked taste, talent, intelligence, craftsmanship or good intentions, but none of them could make the character go. None of them — and this refers primarily to Mantlo, who wrote the bulk of the stories — paid attention to the sound advice given by Howard's creator in an **HTD** Letter's Column: Anyone writing the book after Gerber should either *become* Gerber ("a fate too horrible to contemplate") or "put themselves on the line" as much as he did. Which meant changing Howard. That doesn't mean simply "rounding out" the character as Mantlo claimed he wanted to do. And it doesn't mean "blanderizing" the character to fit the expectations of a mass audience, as Huyck and Katz did. A new writer should have radically re-created the Duck in his own image — should have used Howard as a duck-shaped ink-blot onto which the author could project his own neuroses.

"What Marvel ultimately did with Howard," Gerber now says, "was exactly what you'd expect a corporation to do; they did a very compromised version of the character that sort of looked and talked like Howard, but didn't have any conviction behind it because that's not what the person writing it really believed. It came off as phoney. It came off as wrong." Mantlo tried damn hard — the sincerity of his attempt was obvious in every panel — but he never, in my opinion, really entered the Duck's frame of mind. Nor did

Steve Skeates, Steve Grant, Marv Wolfman, Mark Evanier or Mary Skrenes (who couldn't become "as one" with Howard because she was already — if my guess is right — another character in the story.) Nor did Hyuck and Katz.

Again, I mean no insult to any of the other writers by any of what I write. After all, "He couldn't relate to a talking duck" is scarcely the most damning criticism one could level against an author...

...but I wouldn't recommend that any but the most assiduous collectors seek out the later back issues of **HTD**. Nor do I care to detail them at any length. Actually, I'd rather not deal with them at all.

For the sake of mindless completism, I should mention that in **HTD** 30 and 31 (the last two issues of the color comic before the black-and-white magazine started), Bill Mantlo ties up the Dr. Bong story. In the process, he introduces a new continuing character, Claude Starkowsky (a slightly shell-shocked welder) and re-unites Howard and Beverly (Mantlo tries to convince us that the consummation of her marriage never really happened after all.)

The first issue of the black-and-white magazine brings together the whole cast of characters — Howard, Beverly, Winda, Paul, Claude, and Lee. Lee starts a cab company in Cleveland, and Howard the Duck becomes Howard the Hack. The Kidney Lady is revealed as some sort of sorceress; after she is done away with, the cast moves into her house. We also get (by way of proving that this is no Code-censored comic) a clear, unveiled, unshaded, unembarrassed, completely extraneous, here-they-are-boys view of Beverly's breasts. And you don't even have to tip her a dollar.

About Beverly: I agree with the decision to bring her back; her contentment at the prospect of being Mrs. Bong always struck me as horribly out of character, considering the good Doctor's crimes. But the woman in the b&w magazines scarcely resembles the Beverly we once knew — she doesn't get into fights with Howard; she doesn't lapse into non-sequitors; she doesn't make us laugh. She's little more than The Girlfriend. One suspects that she was kept in the strip only because somebody felt that draping a big-titted redhead across the covers helped sell the magazine.

During the magazine's brief run, Quasi-Howard went on to meet a great number of offbeat characters—Jackpot, Mr. Chicken, Chair-thing, the Eggs-men, Hemlock Shoals, Mailer, Kong Lomerate, Pinball Lizard, Drakula, more, more, more. None of them matter. He also became reacquainted with Dr. Joon Moon Yuc, Pro Rata, the Supreme Soofi, Man-Thing, Dr. Reich (revealed to be, not Adolph Hitler, but Hitler's dentist — *why* , Mantlo, *why, why, why*?) None of *that* matters, either. There was a backup strip, **Street People**, by Lynn Graeme (the magazine's editor) and Ned Sonntag, which tried to recapture the spirit of the '60s Undergrounds. It, too, doesn't matter.

A few stories do deserve special mention:

In 2's "Animal Indecency," morality-monger Wally **Sidney** forces Howard to wear pants. Those with any talent at all for anagrams can easily guess the name of the company that necessitated this change in Howard's sartorial habits. Seems these folks insisted that Marvel put as much distance as possible between Howard and a certain other duck. The pants never quite looked right. (Brian Bolland and Val Mayerik found a way to make them acceptable in the recent issue 33. The trick is too keep Howard's body thin and the head large.)

3's "A Christmas For Carol" featured Greedy Killerwatt, a character originated by Leonard Rifas in **All-Atomic Comics**. Is this the first time Marvel ever used a character originated by someone outside the company..? At any rate, this was the story in which Bill Mantlo told us all the truth, the horrible deadly *truth* about the dangers of nuclear power. Like many another snarling lefty, Mantlo — judging from the letters column — wanted to believe that being politically correct placed his writing beyond criticism. Well, I've marched in anti-nuke demonstrations with the best of 'em, and I refuse to be accused of hateful, nasty, antisocial thoughtcrime if I call the story a failure. I don't mind agit-prop. But there's no excuse for dull agit-prop.

Issue 6 featured Howard's return to his home planet. This was an ambitious idea, and it proved to be the most popular b&w story of all. Gerber, by all reports, hated it. I think it's a bit crowded and complicated; this issue has a lot of traffic in it, and it needed better direction. But all possible cudos go to Michael Golden and Bob McLeod, who drew more ducks than any artists should ever be asked to, and gave each one an individual personality.

Issue 8 tried to satirize **Playboy**. I mention it because this issue really does represent the nadir. You could have more fun jogging through Buchenwald.

Steve Grant's story in **Bizarre Adventures** wasn't half-bad, actually. It retells Capra's classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, with Howard in the Jimmy Stewart role. The Duck wants to off himself again; an incompetent angel tries to talk him out of it by showing Howard how different life would be for his friends had he never existed. Unfortunately, all Howard's friends seem much better off for having never encountered the fowl! Now, the only problem with this story is that there's just one possible ending for it — and since Howard's a continuing character, Grant couldn't use it.

*****

Apparently, some quirk of Howard's legal status (*Mein Name ist Hase, Ich weis von nichts*) requires the appearance of a new Duck story at certain times. So, after an interruption of nearly seven years, **Howard the Duck** 32 appeared in late 1985. Within its covers was an old story by

Steve Grant, written to be topical some four years previous. The less said the better.

Well, not quite. According to **Comics Journal** 101, the story behind that issue was more interesting than the issue itself. The lawsuit being long since settled, Marvel asked Gerber to write Howard again. He had problems, however, with the episodes that had appeared since 29. His original solution: explain that Bzzk'Joh, from 23, has been pummelling poor Howard for some six years continuously, and that all those other stories were really just the Duck's punch-drunk hallucinations. Which, if you ask me, was a pretty funny idea.

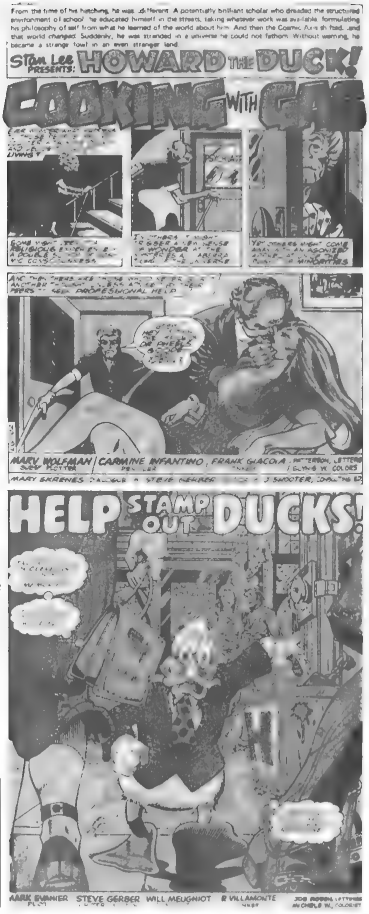
According to the journal, Jim Shooter thought otherwise. He assumed (perhaps rightly) that Bill Mantlo would take this turn of events as an insult. Gerber's revised solution: explain that the Mantlo stories were actually movies created by Vhiteep of the planet Krylor and...no, let's not go into it. Suffice it to say that this extremely complicated solution would have allowed Gerber to use what he liked from the Mantlo stories and ignore the rest. Shooter heavily edited this script; Gerber got angry; he and the Duck became quits again.

Me, I think Gerber should have just ignored the Mantlo stories completely. No need to come up with some forced device to explain their absence from the canon. They just never happened. To hell with logic. To hell with continuity. Let the readers complain.

*****

The latest installment in the Duck saga is a genuinely positive development. **HTD** 33 came out, bearing a September, 1986 date. It features the first comics work of Christopher Stager, a (I hope I'm getting his background correctly) not-yet-professional film-maker. It's funny! The damn thing's actually funny! I mean, I didn't bust a gut reading it — some ideas don't work, some of the dialogue's a little lame (especially the scientist's), but within these covers lurk a few unmistakable grins and smirks and ha-has, not to mention some nice illustrations by Val Mayerick.

Unlike Mantlo and Co., Stager completely re-imagines Howard...he's mellower, cooler, less angry at the world, yet still very much the continual loser. And somehow he's even more depressed and depressing than before. He's a different Duck. Stager's unafraid to make him, for the first time, truly despicable and mean-spirited — he's just as much the victimizer as he is the victim in this story. If Lucasfilm hasn't completely succeeded in making the name of Howard the Duck stink in the nostrils of civilised people everywhere, perhaps Marvel will continue the old bird's adventures, and allow Stager to lead him further away from the path of righteousness.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MARV WOLFMAN | CARMINE INFANTINO, FRANK GIACOIA
HELP STAMP OUT DUCKS!
MARK BUNNER STEVE GERBER WILL MEUGNIOT

More adventure than humanly possible.
HOWARD

THE MOVIE

CAST

Beverly Switzler . . . . . LEA THOMPSON
Dr. Jenning . . . . . JEFFREY JONES
Phil Blumburtt . . . . . TIM ROBBINS
Howard T. Duck . . . . . ED GALE
Howard T Duck . . . . . CHIP ZIEN
Howard T Duck . . . . . TIM ROSE
Howard T Duck . . . . . STEVE SLEAP
Howard T. Duck . . . . . PETER BAIRD
Howard T Duck . . . . . MARY WELLS
Howard T. Duck . . . . . LISA STURZ
Howard T Duck . . . . . JORDAN PRENTICE
Lt. Welker . . . . . PAUL GUILFOYLE
Ronette . . . . . LIZ SAGAL
Cal . . . . . DOMINIQUE DAVALOS
K.C. . . . . HOLLY ROBINSON
Ginger Moss . . . . . TOMMY SWERDLOW
Ritchie . . . . . RICHARD EDSON
Carter . . . . . MILES CHAPIN
First Cop . . . . . RICHARD McGONAGLE
Coramae . . . . . VIRGINIA CAPERS
Additional Ducks . . . . . DEBBIE CARRINGTON
Waitress . . . . . JORLI McLAIN
Club Owner . . . . . MICHAEL SUNDOVAL
Hot Tub Spa Owner . . . . . SHELDON FELDNER
Grossbach . . . . . LEE ANTHONY
Dr Chapin . . . . . PAUL COMI
Teacher . . . . . MAUREEN COYNE
State Trooper . . . . . JAMES LASHLY
TV Reporter . . . . . TOM PARKER
TV Duck Hunter . . . . . ED HOLMES
Larry Scientist . . . . . DAVID PAYMER
Hanson . . . . . WILLIAM HALL
Sergeant . . . . . DENNY DELK
First Trucker . . . . . MARTIN GANAPOLER
Second Trucker . . . . . TOM RAYHALL
Third Trucker . . . . . GARY LITTLEJOHN
Bartender in Rock Club . . . . . THOMAS DOLBY
Punk . . . . . KRISTOPHER LOGAN
Bender . . . . . REED KIRK RAHLMANN
Pimples . . . . . JOHN FLECK
Skin Head . . . . . WILLAM McCOY
Lover Boy . . . . . STEVE KRAVITZ
Lover Girl . . . . . ANNE TOFFLEMIRE
Mama Biker . . . . . MARCIA BANKS
Bag Lady . . . . . NANCY FISH
Club Bouncer . . . . . MONTY HOFFMAN
Kirby . . . . . TED KURTZ
Chef . . . . . WOOD MOY
Hostess . . . . . WANDA McCADDON
First Tour Guide . . . . . JAMES BRADY
Screaming Woman . . . . . CAROL McELHENEY
Bear . . . . . JEANNE LAUREN
Stunt Ducks . . . . . MARGARITA FERNANDEZ
FELIX SILLA
AND
RICHARD KILEY as the Voice of the Cosmos

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Produced by . . . . . GLORIA KATZ
Written by . . . . . WILLARD HUYCK & GLORIA KATZ
Based on the Marvel Comics Character "Howard the Duck"
Created by STEVE GERBER

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Co-Producer . . . . . ROBERT LATHAM BROWN
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Music Score Composed and Conducted by . . . . . JOHN BARRY
Original Songs Produced by . . . . . THOMAS DOLBY
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Written by THOMAS DOLBY and ALLEE WILLIS

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Produced by THOMAS DOLBY
Written by THOMAS DOLBY and ALLEE WILLIS

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Produced by THOMAS DOLBY
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Written by THOMAS DOLBY, ALLEE WILLIS and GEORGE CLINTON

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Produced by THOMAS DOLBY
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And now we must fulfill the saddest of our obligations.

I've been instructed to temper my speech concerning Howard's Hollywood adventure. After all, one does not insult the host at a party. And make no mistake: *Howard The Duck: The Movie* is the primary reason why we have gathered here today.

Please understand, I'd much prefer to say kind words. I'd love to have been able to deliver a toast instead of a eulogy. For one thing, a successful **Howard** movie would have meant a wider audience for the book you now hold. As things stand, I can hope to speak to only a handful of aficionados.

Steve Gerber very much wanted the film to succeed, and worked hard (as both "creative consultant" and as unofficial flackserson) to make the thing work. He would not say a bad thing about the script before the film came out, though I'm positive he should have started crying rape a few minutes after he first read *fade-in*. He believes in the character he created and, no doubt, was never adverse to the idea of his duck becoming beloved by millions.

He bears no blame for the film's failure.

William Huyck and Gloria Katz do.

They wrote the script together. He directed; she produced.

They were the wrong folks for the project — this, despite the fact that they created the project. And despite the fact that they liked the character, and waited patiently for the rights to become available. (I'm not sure who had them, Marvel Productions toyed with the idea of an animated Howard series a few years back; a few pre-production drawings are all that remain from that dalliance with the Duck.) And comic book fan George Lucas was the wrong producer — despite the gloss he gave the production, despite the excellent special effects provided by his firm, Industrial Light and Magic, and despite his willingness to open his coffers *wide*. All these people had the best of intentions. There's a road paved with good intentions, and you know where it leads.

The fact remains that *Howard The Duck*, ostensibly a comedy, doesn't provide a single solid laugh. Not one.

Perhaps this review should end right there. But I think that *Howard* is, in its way, an important film, and worth discussion at length. Important not so much in and of itself, but because it encapsulates the defects of so many other Hollywood efforts. Important as a symptom of disease.

Let us get one thing straight before we continue — the costume. Most reviewers made caustic comments about the unconvincing Duck uniform. One can easily picture George Lucas wandering around Marin County right now, crying to the Bay area's fog-shrouded skies: "The costume! the damn costume! If only I'd made it *better*! Or maybe did the duck with puppets. That would have made

all the difference..." But in point of fact, if the film had contained even the barest minimum of giggles, nobody would have minded if Howard looked like a kid in a $4.95 Halloween suit.

Let us get another thing straight — the concept. No, it was not "too weird" for a mass audience. Everybody agrees that the film had highly effective pre-publicity, and this pre-publicity pretty firmly established the film's premise. People genuinely wanted to see *Howard* before word-of-mouth convinced them otherwise; nobody was alienated by the film's subject matter. Nobody minded the idea of a talking duck. They just disliked the idea of an *unfunny* talking duck.

How unfunny was it? A reviewer for the **LA Weekly** summed up matters nicely by pointing out that, in the comics, when Howard learns that he has landed in a place called Cleveland, he asks himself: "Cleveland—how can a place possess so eerie and evil a name and not be ruled by demons..?" Yet in the film, Howard merely says "Cleveland — what a weird name."

We must get through the distressing business of plot summary before analysing further. *HTD The Movie* opens on Duckworld, with the camera prowling around Howard's (too upscale) apartment, picking out a number of mildly amusing items, and eventually giving us a clear view of Howard himself. Within seconds, scientists from Earth pluck him off Duckworld with a beam from a "Laser Spectrascope." He travels to Earth, specifically to a Cleveland alleyway and in rapid succession encounters motorcycle gangs, violent punks, singer Beverly Switzler, a crazed junior scientist, a mammoth unemployment office, the police, and a scientist named Jennings whose body has been expropriated by a Dark Overlord of the Universe. Howard sacrifices his chances of returning home in order to save Earth. End of summary.

The film's a bore and a chore, composed primarily of 'action' scenes, extended chases, and sound-and-light shows, all as overly familiar as one's own warts. The $33 million is easily $30 too many; if the word "over-produced" ever makes it into the **Oxford English Dictionary**, *Howard The Duck* will suffice as definition. Really, people, does every movie have to be a numbingly *sensory* experience? Why must *Howard* be as visually and aurally noisy as the Indiana Jones movies? Why this hatred of all things verbal?

For in the beginning was the word. Comics are ostensibly a visual medium, yet it was Howard's *words* that set us laughing. Ah, but the new Hollywood has become a roller-coaster dealership to a post-literate generation. The new Hollywood doesn't tell stories, it sells celluloid amphetamines. The new Hollywood doesn't want to screen films, it wants to inject them into your system. The new Hollywood requires the attention of innumerable 15-to-25-

year-olds, who haven't the mental equipment to stay awake without being periodically slapped upside the head. The new Hollywood hates the word.

The Hyucks are, ostensibly, writers. They're supposed to be word people. Yet their screenplay is composed according to an insidious formula designed to keep words, and all the things that words do best, to the barest minimum.

You can learn this formula, as I did, in any introductory screenwriting class. Different instructors will disagree on exactly which number you should plug into (X) in the following algorithms, but the principle is easy to grasp: Dialogue can never exceed (X) words (generally 20) and that's the absolute maximum or (X) lines (generally, 3). A scene may contain no more than (X) pieces of dialogue (generally, 10). A scene may go on for only (X) pages (generally, 3, and you'd better have good reason to go *that* long). And so forth. You get the idea.

Now that you know something of the formula, go take another look — if you've the constitution for it — at the *Howard* movie. Better still, try to grab a peek at the actual screenplay. The bloody thing really is every bit as schematic as I've made it out to be, isn't it? It follows the formula as fixedly as a computer follows a program.

The problem with all this formulised film-making is that it leaves no room for *real* dialogue. No room for character. No room for the humor that can come out of character. Gerber wrote some fine gags in his comics, but there's no place for them in this script. The jokes take too long to set up. They just won't fit.

And if the Procrustean word-count allows any hint of personality to remain, the new Hollywood's obsessive fear of alienating the audience will demolish all remaining vestiges of effective characterisation. $33 million films, these days, don't have protagonists. they have heroes. Someone to identify with. **Role Models.**

Go back to the interview portion of this book, and you'll see Howard's creator spell it out for you. Howard's no role model.

He's a feisty, cowardly, captious, spiteful, temperamental little creature who often returns bad for good, and often teeters on sanity's brink. He's a chronic loser. Perhaps worst of all, he's better-read than the average audience member.

Who can identify with that?

Nowadays, the main figure in a movie is supposed to be like the main figure in a video game—a substitute *you*. Who wants to project himself onto an easily-angered little snot? Or onto an habitual failure?

So the Hyucks turn Howard the Duck into Howard the Yupple. He's an *ad writer*, for Chrissakes, and he's actually proud of it! Except he also has *big dreams* of becoming a rock star, and you can bet that, in true *Flashdance* fashion,

THE MOVIE

Howard will realise those big dreams by film's end. Nothing about the Hyuck Howard could possibly alienate a mass audience (or interest a sophisticated one) — he's not particularly well-spoken, but he's brave, self-sacrificing, and true to his friends. (We must point out that he has one outburst at Beverly near the beginning; it seems out of character, or at least out of the re-engineered character.)

Despite the tone of the immediately foregoing, I'm no purist. If the Huycks felt so uncomfortable with Howard's previously established personality that they had to jettison large chunks of it — fine. But couldn't they come up with something interesting to replace what they discarded?

Beverly has gone through the same depressing process. Reimagining her as a punk rocker was a genuinely fine idea But what kind of punker do the Huycks give us? This woman doesn't use drugs, doesn't sleep around, doesn't behave raucously, and doesn't even use naughty language. She's a punkette you'd be happy to take home to meet mother. Too bad; Lea Thompson's a thoroughly fetching actress, and I'm certain she could have handled a saltier version of the character. True, she does have a scene in which she practically seduces Howard — but the dialogue here never truly convinces. Judging from this scene, and from a similar boy-girl exchange in *Indiana Jones*, you'd find it hard to believe that the Hyucks are married—you'd think that only a couple of virgins would give such lines to characters toying with the idea of getting into bed together.

I could go on. I could list a few of the film's virtues: Thompson, Jeffrey Jones, even the monsters (I don't like the fact that they're there, but what's there is breathtakingly well executed). I could add to my list of the film's flaws — the reliance on stupid puns and stupider devices like "Quak-fu."

I could — but it's better to speak of the movie that should have been.

The *Howard The Duck* that I wanted to see would have been produced more-or-less on the level of *Dark Star*. Small-scale, tacky, and lovable. Quirky, ragged, and not always well-paced. Surreal, slightly alienating, and designed to chase the rigid-minded out of the auditorium. The director would have possessed a strong personality, and wouldn't have feared redefining the character in original and unusual ways. The film would have set Howard against society's annoyances — against double-speaking politicos or pious fanatics or the materialistic or the idealistic — whatever thorn happened to be in the filmmakers' side. The film would have dialogue, *real* dialogue, clever dialogue. The film would have made people laugh.

Compare *that* to the one we got!

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